The Linguistic Circle of Geneva

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Alan Bass

Linguists are becoming more and more interested in the genealogy of linguistics. And in reconstituting the history or prehistory of their science, they are discovering numerous ancestors, sometimes with a certain astonished recognition. Interest in the origin of linguistics is awakened when the problems of the origin of language cease to be proscribed (as they had been from the end of the nineteenth century) and when a certain geneticism—or a certain generativism—comes back into its own. One could show that this is not a chance encounter. This historical activity is no longer elaborated solely at the margins of scientific practice, and its results are already being felt. In particular, we are no longer at the stage of the prejudice according to which linguistics as a science was born of a single "epistemological break"—a concept, called Bachelardian, much used or abused today—and of a break occurring in our immediate vicinity. We no longer think, as does Maurice Grammont, that "everything prior to the nineteenth century, which is not yet linguistics, can be expedited in several lines."[1] Noam Chomsky, in an article announcing his *Cartesian Linguistics,* which presents in its major lines the concept of "generative grammar," states: "My aim here is not to justify the interest of this investigation, nor to describe summarily its procedure, but instead to underline that *by a curious detour* it takes us back to a tradition of

1. Maurice Grammont, cited by Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics* (New York, 1966), p. 1.

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ancient thought, rather than constituting a new departure or a radical innovation in the domain of linguistics and psychology."[2]

If we were to set ourselves down in the space of this "curious detour," we could not help encountering the "linguistics" of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. We would have to ask ourselves, then, in what ways Rousseau's reflections on the sign, on language, on the origin of languages, on the relations between speech and writing, and so on announce (but what does "announce" mean here?) what we are so often tempted to consider as the very modernity of linguistic science, that is, modernity *as* linguistic science, since so many other "human sciences" refer to linguistics as their titular model. And we are all the more encouraged to practice this detour in that Chomsky's major references, in *Cartesian Linguistics,* are to the *Logic* and *General and Reasoned Grammar* of Port-Royal, works that Rousseau knew well and held in high esteem.[3] For example, on several occasions Rousseau cites Duclos' commentary on the *General and Reasoned Grammar.* The *Essay on the Origin of Languages* even closes with one of these citations. Thus Rousseau acknowledges his debt.

There is only one allusion to Rousseau himself in *Cartesian Linguistics,* in a note which on the one hand compares him to Wilhelm von Humboldt and on the other, while referring only to the most general propositions of the second *Discourse,* presents him as strictly Cartesian, at least as concerns the concepts of animality and humanity. Although one might, in a certain sense, speak of Rousseau's fundamental Cartesianism in this regard, it seems that a more important and original place must be reserved for him in such a history of philosophy and linguistics. It is in this sense, under the heading of a very preliminary schema, that I venture the following propositions.

2. Chomsky, "De quelques constantes de la théorie linguistique," *Diogène,* no. 51 (1965); my italics. See also Chomsky, *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (The Hague, 1964), pp. 15 ff. There is an analogous gesture in Jakobson, who refers not only to Peirce and, as does Chomsky, to Humboldt but also to John of Salisbury, to the Stoics, and to Plato's *Cratylus:* see Jakobson, "A la recherche de l'essence du langage," *Diogène,* no. 51 (1965).

3. "I began with some book of philosophy, like the Port-Royal *Logic,* Locke's *Essay,* Malebranch, Leibniz, Descartes, etc." (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes,* vol. 1, *Confessions* [Paris, 1959], p. 237).

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One is authorized to speak of a linguistics of Rousseau only on two conditions and in two senses:

1. On the condition and in the sense of a systematic formulation, one that defines the project of a theoretical science of language, in its method, its object, and its rigorously proper field. This might be accomplished by means of a gesture that for convenience's sake could be called an "epistemological break," there being no assurance that the stated intention to "break" has such an effect, nor that the so-called break is ever a—unique—datum in a work or an author. This first condition and first sense should always be implied by what we will entitle the *opening of the field,* it being understood that such an opening also amounts to a *delimitation* of the field.

2. On the condition and in the sense of what Chomsky calls the "constants of linguistic theory": in that the system of fundamental concepts, the exigencies and norms that govern the linguistics called modern, such as it is entitled and represented in its scientificity as in its modernity, is already at work, and discernible as such, in Rousseau's enterprise, in its very text; which, moreover, would not only be (and doubtless would not at all be) to interpret this text as the happy anticipation of a thinker who is to have predicted and preformed modern linguistics. On the contrary, is this not a question of a very general ground of possibilities, a ground on which might be raised all kinds of subordinate cross sections and secondary periodizations? Is it not a question of both Rousseau's project and modern linguistics belonging in common to a determined and finite system of conceptual possibilities, to a common language, to a reserve of oppositions of signs (signifiers/concepts) which first of all is none other than the most ancient fund of Western metaphysics? The latter is articulated, in its diverse epochs, according to schemas of implication that are not as easily mastered as is sometimes believed: whence the illusions of the break, the mirages of the new, the confusion or crushing of layers, the artifice of extractions and cross sections, the archeological lure. The *closure of concepts:* such would be the title that we might propose for this second condition and this second sense.

These two conditions seem to be fulfilled; and in these two senses it seems that one may legitimately speak of a linguistics of Rousseau. Here we can delineate it only through several indices.

I. The Opening of the Field

Rousseau states and wants, or in any case states that he wants, a break with every supernatural explication of the origin and functioning of language. If the theological hypothesis is not simply set aside, it never

intervenes in its own name, de jure, in Rousseau's explication and description. This rupture is signified in at least two texts and at two points: in the second *Discourse* and in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages.*

Referring to Condillac, to whom he recognizes he owes a great deal, Rousseau clearly expresses his disagreement as concerns the procedure followed in the *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge.* Condillac, in effect, *seems* to take a constituted society, created by God, as given at the very moment when he asks the question of language, the question of the genesis and system of language, of the relations between natural and instituted signs, and so on. Now Rousseau wants to account for the very emergence of convention, that is, in his own words, to account simultaneously for society and language on the basis of a "pure state of nature." So he must put between parentheses everything that Condillac takes as given, and in effect this is what he allegedly does.

The concept of *nature,* therefore, bears the burden of scientificity here, as much in the requirement of a natural (nonsupernatural) explanation as in the ultimate reference to a purely (presocial, prehistoric, prelinguistic, etc.) natural state. The field of the analysis, the genealogical regression, and the explanation of functioning are all opened as such in the demand for naturality. We do not mean that Rousseau *himself* opened this field and this demand. We simply wish to recognize the signs that show him caught in this opening whose history and system remain to be constituted. The difficulty of the task and the theoretical or methodological innovations called for are such that to point out signs can only attribute, assign, and situate these signs as touchstones.

Before even asking whether natural naturality and originality are not still theological functions in Rousseau's discourse—and in general in every discourse—let us make specific the criticism addressed to Condillac. It could be shown—but this is not my aim here—that Condillac's procedure is not so far removed in its principles from Rousseau's and that the theological reference easily accommodates a concern for natural explanation:

> Adam and Eve did not owe to experience the exercise of the operations of their soul, and, emerging from the hands of God, by means of this extraordinary help, they were capable of reflection and of communicating their thoughts to each other. But I suppose that, some time after the deluge, two children, one of each sex, had been lost in the general desolation, before knowing the use of any sign. I am authorized to do so because of the fact I have reported. Who knows if a people does not exist somewhere that owes its origin only to such an event? Permit me to make this supposition; the question is to know how this growing nation fashioned for itself a language.[4]

4. Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (Paris, 1973), p. 193.

Further on, at the end of a note: "If I suppose two children in the necessity of imagining even the very first signs of language, it is because I have believed that it is not sufficient for a philosopher to say that a thing has been accomplished by extraordinary means; but that it was his duty to explain how it *could have* been done by natural means."[5] I underline the conditional tense, which supports the entire scientificity of the argument.

Thus, Condillac renounces neither a natural explanation nor the conjunction of the questions of the origin of languages and the origin of societies. Theological certitude is accommodated to a natural explanation according to a very classical framework in which the concepts of nature, experience, Creation, and Fall are strictly inseparable. (The most remarkable example of such a "system" is doubtless that of Nicolas Malebranche, which I am recalling here only because of its well-known influence on Rousseau.) Here the event of the Flood, whose analog will be found in Rousseau, liberates the functioning of the natural explanation.

This does not prevent Rousseau from taking his leave from Condillac precisely at the point at which he reproaches Condillac for taking as given that which is to be explained, that is, "a kind of already established society among the inventors of language." Rousseau reproaches Condillac less for rejecting every model of natural explanation—that would be untrue—than for not radicalizing his concept of nature: Condillac would not have descended to a pure state of nature to analyze the emergence of language:

> Permit me for a moment to consider all the confusions of the origin of Languages. I could content myself with citing or repeating here all of the Abbé de Condillac's investigations into this matter, which fully confirm my feeling, and which, perhaps, gave me my first ideas. But given the manner in which this Philosopher resolves the difficulties he creates for himself on the origin of institutionalized signs, that is, a kind of already established society among the inventors of language, I believe that in referring to his reflections I must add to them my own.[6]

Thus Condillac seems to have committed what Rousseau a little further on calls "the fault of those who, reasoning on the State of Nature, transport into it ideas taken from Society."

The properly scientific concern, therefore, is indicated by the deci-

5. Ibid., n. 1.

6. Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes,* vol. 3, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* (second *Discourse*), p. 146; all further references to the *Discourse* will be included in the text. On all the problems of language in Rousseau, I refer most notably to the very valuable notes of Jean Starobinski in this edition and of course to the other works on Rousseau by this author, particularly *La Transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris, 1964).

sion to refer only to purely natural causes. Such is the motif on which the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* opens, from its very first paragraph: "In order to tell, it is necessary to go back to some principle that belongs to the locality itself and antedates its customs, for speech, being the first social institution, owes its form to natural causes alone."[7] Now, without even entering into the content of the natural genealogy of language that Rousseau proposes, let us note that the so-called epistemological break paradoxically corresponds to a kind of break in the field of natural causality. If "speech," "the first social institution, owes its form to natural causes alone," then the latter, themselves acting as a force of break with nature, *naturally* inaugurate an order radically *heterogeneous* to the natural order.[8] The two—apparently contradictory—conditions for the constitution of a scientific field and object, here language, would thus be fulfilled: a natural, a continuously natural, causality and a break designating the irreducible autonomy and originality of a domain. The question of the origin is in itself suspended in that it no longer calls for a continuous, real, and natural description, being but the index of an internal structural description.

Certainly all this is neither without difficulty nor without a certain apparent incoherence, for which Rousseau often has been reproached. And it has been that much easier to make this reproach because Rousseau himself on several occasions seems to renounce the natural explanation and to admit a kind of violent—catastrophic—interruption into the concatenation of natural causality: an arbitrary interruption, an interruption of the arbitrary, the decision which permits only the arbitrary and the conventional to be instituted. One comes back to the necessity of this question wherever the conceptuality organized around the opposition nature/arbitrary is accredited. Before defining the necessity of both the break and the at least apparent failure, before underlining

7. Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages,* trans. John H. Moran (New York, 1966), p. 5; all further references to the *Essay* will be included in the text.

8. Attention must be paid to the word "form": natural causes must produce the variety of forms *of* speech as the variety *of* languages. The *Essay* accounts for this by means of physics, geography, and climatology. This distinction between speech itself and languages underlies the notion of form at the beginning of the *Essay:*

> Speech distinguishes man among the animals; language distinguishes nations from each other; one does not know where a man comes from until he has spoken. Out of usage and necessity, each learns the language of his own country. But what determines that this language is that of his country and not that of another? In order to tell, it is necessary to go back to some principle that belongs to the locality itself and antedates its customs, for speech, being the first social institution, owes its form to natural causes alone. [P. 5]

But the text that follows perhaps permits an extension of the variety of forms beyond the diversity of oral languages to include the multiplicity of "substances of expressions," the means of communication. These natural means are the senses, and each sense has its language. See section II below, "The Closure of Concepts."

the scientific and heuristic motivation that accommodates its opposite here, let us briefly recall its well-known points of apparition.

1. After attempting in the second *Discourse,* by means of a fiction, a derivation of languages on the basis of a primitive dispersion in the state of pure nature, on the basis of the biological nucleus uniting mother and child, Rousseau has to step back and suppose "this first difficulty overcome":

> Notice again that the Child having all his needs to explain, and consequently more things to say to the Mother than the Mother to the Child, it is he who must bear the burden of invention, and that the language he employs must in great part be his own handiwork; which multiplies Languages by as many individuals as there are to speak them, to which the wandering and vagabond life, which leaves no idiom the time to become consistent, contributes further still; for to say that the Mother dictates to the child words which he will have to use to ask her for such and such a thing well demonstrates how already formed Languages are taught, but teaches us nothing about how they are formed. *Let us suppose this first difficulty overcome: For a moment let us step across the immense space there had to be between the pure state of Nature and the need for Languages; and supposing them necessary, let us seek out how they might have begun to be established. A new difficulty, worse still than the preceding one; for if men had need of speech in order to learn to think, they had even greater need of knowing how to think in order to find the art of speech.* [P. 147; my italics]

2. And later, when he has taken as given, by means of a *supposition,* both the "immense space there had to be between the pure state of Nature and the need for Languages" and the solution of the circle that demands speech before thought and thought before speech, Rousseau must yet again, *a third time,* recoil before a *third difficulty;* he must even feign giving up on a natural explanation in order to refer back to the hypothesis of divine institution. It is true that in the interval between the supposition and the apparent resignation he will have proposed an entire theory of language: a functional, systematic, and structural theory, whose elaboration is occasioned by the pretext of a genetic question, a fictitious problematic of the origin.

Rousseau's formulation of his apparent resignation, at the point of the third difficulty in the *Discourse* ("As for myself, frightened by the mounting difficulties, and convinced of the almost demonstrable impossibility that Languages could have been born and established by purely human means, I leave to whoever would like to undertake it the discussion of this difficult problem: which was more necessary, an already bound Society, for the institution of Languages, or already invented languages, for the establishment of Society" [p. 151]) is to be juxtaposed with the following formulation from the *Essay,* in which

Rousseau, confronted by the necessity of acknowledging an unforeseen and inexplicable irruption at the origin of languages (transition from the inarticulate cry to articulation and convention), cites Father Lamy's theological hypothesis without criticizing it, although without assuming it, simply in order to illustrate the difficulty of natural explanation: "In all tongues, the liveliest exclamations are inarticulate. Cries and groans are simple sounds. Mutes, which is to say the deaf, can make only inarticulate sounds. Father Lamy thinks that if God had not taught men to speak, they would never have learned by themselves"(p. 14).[9]

The three difficulties have the same form: the circle in which tradition (or transmission) and language, thought and language, society and language each precede the other, postulate and produce each other reciprocally. But these apparent, and apparently avowed, confusions have a reverse side for which in a way they pay the price. The circle, as a vicious circle, a logical circle, by the same token constitutes the rigorously limited, closed, and original autonomy of a field. If there is no entry into the circle, if it is closed, if one is always already set down within it, if it has always already begun to carry us along in its movement, no matter where it is entered, it is because the circle forms a perfectly underivable figure and does so by means of a continuous causality, something other than itself. It has been posited decisively by an absolute, and absolutely irruptive, initiative, making it simultaneously open and closed. Society, language, convention, history, and so on, together with all the possibilities that go along with them, form a system, an organized totality which, in its originality, can be the object of a theory. Beyond its negative and sterilizing effects, beyond the question which it seems incapable of answering logically, the "logical circle" positively delimits an epistemological circle, a field whose objects will be specific. The condition for the study of this field as such is that the genetic and factual derivation be interrupted. Ideal genealogy or structural description: such is Rous-

9. On Father Lamy, I refer to Genevieve Rodin-Lewis' study, "Un théoricien du langage au XVII[e] siècle, Bernard Lamy," *Le Français moderne* (January 1968): 19–50. In the *Confessions,* Rousseau recalls all that he owes to Father Lamy: "One of my favorite Authors, whose works I still reread with pleasure" (p. 238). Earlier on: "The taste that I had for him [M. Salomon] extended to the subjects of which he treated, and I began to seek out books which could help me better to understand him. Those which mixed devoutness with the sciences suited me best; such, particularly, were those of the Oratoire and of Port-Royal. I set myself to reading them, or rather to devouring them. Of these, one fell into my hands by Father Lamy, entitled *Entretiens sur les sciences.* It was a kind of introduction to the knowledge of the books on this topic. I read and reread it a hundred times; I resolved to make it my guide" (p. 232). One might pick out more than one correspondence between the two theories of language, notably as concerns the relations between speech and writing. In Father Lamy's *Rhetoric* one may read: "Words on paper are like a dead body laid out on the ground. In the mouth of whoever proffers them they are efficacious; on paper they are without life, incapable of producing the same effects." And "a written discourse is dead," "the tone, gestures, and air of the face of the speaker support his words" (cited by Rodin-Lewis, "Théoricien du langage," p. 27).

seau's project. Let us cite the *Discourse* once more: "Let us begin by setting aside all the facts, for they do not touch upon the question. The Investigations one may enter into on this subject must not be taken as historical truths, but only as hypothetical and conditional reasoning; more apt to enlighten the Nature of things than to show their veritable origin, and similar to the Investigations made every day by our Physicians concerning the formation of the World" (pp. 132–33).

3. This is what accounts for the absolutely unforeseeable intervention, in the *Essay,* of the "slight movement" of a finger which produces the birth of society and languages. Since the system of the state of Nature could not depart *from itself,* could not itself depart from itself (see the *Discourse,* p. 162), could not spontaneously interrupt itself, some perfectly exterior causality had to come to provoke—*arbitrarily*—this departure, which is none other, precisely, than the *possibility of the arbitrary.* But this arbitrary and exterior causality will also have to act along natural or quasi-natural lines. The causality of the break will have to be both natural and exterior to the state of pure nature, and most notably to the state of nature, the state of the earth that corresponds to the state of nature. Only a *terrestrial revolution* or, rather, the catastrophe of terrestrial revolution, could furnish the model for this causality. This is the center of the *Essay:*

> Supposing eternal spring on the earth; supposing plenty of water, livestock, and pasture, and supposing that men, as they leave the hands of nature, were once spread out in the midst of all that, I cannot imagine how they would ever be induced to give up their primitive liberty, abandoning the isolated pastoral life so fitted to their natural indolence, to impose upon themselves unnecessarily the labors and the inevitable misery of a social mode of life.
>
> He who willed man to be social, by the touch of a finger shifted the globe's axis into line with the axis of the universe. I see such a slight movement changing the face of the earth and deciding the vocation of mankind: in the distance I hear the joyous cries of a naive multitude; I see the building of castles and cities; I see men leaving their homes, gathering to devour each other, and turning the rest of the world into a hideous desert: fitting monument to social union and the usefulness of the arts. [Pp. 38–39][10]

This fiction has the advantage of sketching out a model that explicates *nature's departure from itself;* this departure is simultaneously absolutely natural and absolutely artificial; it must simultaneously respect and violate natural legality. Nature *itself inverts itself,* which it can only do on the basis of a point absolutely exterior to itself, that is, on the basis of a

10. See also Rousseau's fragment on "L'Influence des climats sur la civilisation" (*Oeuvres complètes,* 3:531), and my *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967), pp. 360 ff.

force simultaneously void and infinite. By the same token, this model respects the heterogeneity of the two orders or the two moments (nature and society, nonlanguage and language, etc.) and coordinates the continuous with the discontinuous according to what we have analyzed elsewhere under the rubric of *supplementarity.*[11] For the absolute irruption, the unforeseen revolution which made possible language, institutions, articulation, the arbitrary, and so on, however, has done nothing but develop the *virtualities* already present in the state of pure nature. As is said in the *Discourse,* "*Perfectibility,* the social virtues, and the other faculties that Natural man had received in abundance, could never have been developed by themselves . . . ; they needed for this the fortuitous concourse of several foreign causes which could never be born, and without which he would have remained eternally in his primitive condition" (p. 162).

The notion of virtuality, therefore, assures a cohering and joining function between the two discontinuous orders, as between the two temporalities—imperceptible progression and definitive break—which scan the passage from nature to society.[12] But despite the concepts of pure nature and of virtuality, and even if the original movement of the finger can still supplement the theological hypothesis, even if divine Providence is called upon elsewhere, it remains that Rousseau, at a certain surface of his discourse, can by all rights allege to do without any supernatural explanation and, putting all history and all factual chronology between parentheses, can propose a structural order of the origin and function of language. In doing so, even while respecting the original order of language and society, he correlates this order, and systematically maintains this correlation, with the order of nature, primarily with the geological or geographical order of this nature. Thereby the typology of languages in the *Essay* will conform to a general topology, and "local difference" will be taken into account in the origin of languages (see chap. 8). Corresponding to the opposition south/north is the opposition of languages of passion to languages of need, which are distinguished by the predominance granted to accentuation in the one and articulation in the other, to the vowel in one and to the consonant in the other, to metaphor in one and to exactness and correctness in the other. The latter—the languages of the north—lend themselves more easily to writing; the former naturally reject it. Thus we have a series of correlations. At the pole of the origin, at the point of greatest proximity to the birth of language, there is the chain origin-life-south-summer-

11. See Rousseau, "L'Influence," and my *Grammatologie.*

12. While marking the absolute break which—de jure and structurally—must separate nature and language or society, Rousseau alludes in the *Discourse* "to the inconceivable pains and infinite time that the first invention of Language must have cost," to the "almost imperceptible progress of the beginnings"; "for the more that events were slow to succeed one another, the quicker they are to describe" (pp. 146, 167).

heat-passion-accentuation-vowel-metaphor-song, and so on. At the other pole, to the extent that one departs from the origin: decadence-illness-death-north-winter-cold-reason-articulation-consonant-correctness-prose-writing. But by a strange motion, the more one departs from the origin, the more one tends to come back to what precedes it, to a nature which *has not yet* awakened to speech and to everything that is born along with speech. And between the two polar series are regulated relations of supplementarity: the second series is added to the first in order to be *substituted* for it, but in supplementing a lack in the first series, also to *add* something new, an addition, an *accident,* an excess that *should not have* overtaken the first series. In doing this, the second series will hollow out a new lack or will enlarge the original lack, which will call for a new supplement, and so forth. The same logic is at work in the historic and systematic classification of writings: corresponding to the three states of man in society (savage, barbaric, or policed peoples) are three types of writings (pictographic, ideographic, phonetic).[13] But although writing has a regular relation to the state of language ("Another way of comparing languages and determining their relative antiquity is to consider their script"), its system forms an independent totality in its internal organization and in its principle: "The art of writing does not at all depend upon that of speaking. It derives from needs of a different kind which develop earlier or later according to circumstances entirely independent of the duration of the people" (pp. 16, 19).

Reduced to their most impoverished, most general, most principal framework, such would be the motifs of an opening of the linguistic field. Did Rousseau *himself* and *himself alone* execute this opening, or is he already taken up and included in it? The question has not yet been elaborated fully enough, the terms are still too naive, the alternative is still too restricted for me to be tempted to offer an answer. No problematic, no methodology today seems to me to be capable of pitting itself effectively against the difficulties effectively announced in these questions. Thus without great risk and still in the form of a touchstone, I would say that despite the massive borrowings, despite the complicated geography of sources, despite the passive situation in a milieu, what can be discerned empirically under the rubric of the "work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau" yields a reading of a relatively original and relatively systematic effort to delimit the field of a linguistic science. Today the poverty of these propositions will be more easily accepted, perhaps, if one thinks of

13. See the *Essay:* "These three ways of writing correspond almost exactly to three different stages according to which one can consider men gathered into a nation. The depicting of objects is appropriate to a savage people; signs of words and of propositions, to a barbaric people; and the alphabet to civilized peoples [*peuples policés*]." "To the preceding division there correspond the three conditions of man considered in relation to society. The savage is a hunter, the barbarian is a herdsman, and civil man is a tiller of the soil" (pp. 17, 38).

the imprudent, that is, foolish, statements from which they protect us, at least provisionally.

Of course, it is not a matter of comparing the content of the linguistic knowledge discovered in a given field with the content of modern linguistic knowledge. But the disproportion that would make such a comparison derisory is a disproportion of content: it is massively reduced when theoretical intentions, lineaments, and fundamental concepts are in question.

II. The Closure of Concepts

It is tempting now to invert the procedure of verification and to bring to light, on the basis of certain exemplary projects in modern linguistics, the thread which leads back to Rousseau. Here I can only single out Saussurian linguistics and semiology, taking my justification both from the fact that this is the base of all the modern theories and from the self-evidence or number of the analogies it holds in store.

1. Rousseau and Saussure grant an ethical and metaphysical privilege to the voice. Both posit the inferiority and exteriority of writing in relation to the "internal system of language" (Saussure), and this gesture, whose consequences extend over the entirety of their discourses, is expressed in formulations whose literal resemblance is occasionally surprising. Thus:

SAUSSURE: "Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first."

ROUSSEAU: "Languages are made to be spoken, writing serves only as a supplement of speech. . . . Writing is only the representation of speech."

SAUSSURE: "Whoever says that a certain letter must be pronounced a certain way is mistaking the written image of a sound for the sound itself. . . . To attribute this oddity [*bizarrerie*] to an exceptional pronunciation is also misleading."

ROUSSEAU: "Writing is only the representation of speech; it is odd [*bizarre*] that more care is taken to determine the image than the object."[14]

And one could continue to proliferate citations in order to show that both fear the effects of writing on speech and thus condemn these effects from a moral point of view. All of Rousseau's invectives against a writing which "alters" and "enervates" language, obstructing liberty and life (especially in the *Essay,* chaps. 5 and 20), find their echo in Saussure's

14. The quotations from Saussure are from his *Course in General Linguistics,* trans. Wade Baskin (New York, 1959), pp. 23, 30; all further references to the *Course* will be included in the text. The quotations from Rousseau are from the fragment on "Prononciation" (*Oeuvres complètes,* 2:1249–52).

warnings: "The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words; the spoken forms alone constitute the object." "Writing obscures language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise" (pp. 23–24, 30). The bond between writing and language is "fictitious," "superficial," and yet "writing acquires primary importance," and thus "the natural sequence is reversed" (p. 25). Writing is therefore a "trap," and its actions are "vicious" and "tyrannical" (today we would say *despotic*); its misdeeds are monstrosities, "teratological cases" that linguistics "should put . . . into a special compartment for observation" (p. 32). Finally, both Rousseau and Saussure consider nonphonetic writing—for example, a universal characteristic of the Leibnizian type—as evil itself.[15]

2. Both Rousseau and Saussure make linguistics a part of general semiology, the latter itself being only a branch of the social psychology which grows out of general psychology and general anthropology.

SAUSSURE: "*A science that studies the life of signs within society* is conceivable; it should be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (from the Greek *sēmeion,* "sign"). Semiology should show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts. To determine the exact place of semiology is the task of the psychologist" (p. 16).

From the very first chapter of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* ("On the Various Means of Communicating Our Thoughts"), Rousseau also proposes a general theory of signs ordered according to the regions of sensibility that furnish the various signifying substances. This general semiology is part of a general sociology and anthropology. Speech is the "first social institution" and thus can be studied only by studying the origin and general structure of society, from within a general theory of the forms and substances of signification. This theory is inseparable from a psychology of the passions. For "the first invention of speech is due not to need but passion" (p. 11).

> As soon as one man was recognized by another as a sentient, thinking being similar to himself, the desire or need to communicate his feelings and thoughts made him seek the means to do so. Such means can be derived only from the senses, the only instruments through which one man can act upon another. Hence the institution of sensate signs for the expression of thought. The inventors of language did not proceed rationally in this way; rather their instinct suggested the consequence to them.
>
> Generally, the means by which we can act on the senses of

15. See my *Grammatologie,* pp. 57 and 429.

> others are restricted to two: that is, movement and voice. The action of movement is immediate through touching, or mediate through gesture. The first can function only within arm's length, while the other extends as far as the visual ray. Thus vision and hearing are the only passive organs of language among distinct individuals. [Pp. 5–6]

There follows a confrontation of the language of gesture and the language of voice: although both are "natural," they are unequally dependent upon convention. From this point of view, Rousseau certainly can vaunt the merits of mute signs, which are more natural and more immediately eloquent. But in linking society to passion and convention, he grants a privilege to speech within the general system of signs—and consequently to linguistics within semiology. This is the third point of a possible comparison of principles or program.

3. The privilege of speech is linked, in particular, in Saussure as in Rousseau, to the institutionalized, conventional, arbitrary character of the sign. The verbal sign is more arbitrary, Rousseau and Saussure think, than other signs:

SAUSSURE: "Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system" (p. 67).

ROUSSEAU: "Although the language of gesture and spoken language are equally natural, still the first is easier and depends less upon conventions" (*Essay,* p. 6). And on the other hand, for Rousseau, only linguistics is an anthropological, social, and psychological science because "conventional language is characteristic of man alone" and because the origin of speech is in passion and not need: "It seems then that need dictated the first gestures, while the passions stimulated the first words" (pp. 10, 11). This explains the fact that language is originally metaphorical (see chap. 3). The originality of the linguistic field has to do with the break from natural need, a break which simultaneously initiates passion, convention, and speech.

4. For the same reason, and as Saussure will do later, Rousseau rejects any pertinence of the physiological point of view in the explication of language. The physiology of the phonic organs is not an intrinsic part of the discipline of linguistics. With the same organs, with no assignable physiological or anatomic difference, men speak and animals do not.

SAUSSURE: "The question of the vocal apparatus obviously takes a secondary place in the problem of speech" (p. 10).

ROUSSEAU: "Conventional language is characteristic of man alone.

That is why man makes progress, whether for good or ill, and animals do not. That single distinction would seem to be far-reaching. It is said to be explicable by organic differences. I would be curious to witness this explanation" (p. 10).

(There are other analogous texts, due to the topicality and sharpness of the debate over this question at the time when Rousseau was editing the *Dictionnaire de musique:* most notably, see s.v. "Voice," and Dodart's critique, cited by Duclos, s.v. "Declamation of the Ancients.")

5. If animals do not speak, it is because they do not articulate. The possibility of human language, its emergence from animal calls, what makes possible the functioning of conventional language, is therefore *articulation.* The word and the concept of articulation play a central role in the *Essay,* despite the dream of a natural language, a language of unarticulated song, modeled after the neuma. In the *Course in General Linguistics,* immediately after noting that the "question of the vocal apparatus obviously takes a secondary place in the problem of speech," Saussure continues:

> One definition of *articulated speech* might confirm that conclusion. In Latin, *articulus* means a member, part, or subdivision of a sequence; applied to speech, articulation designates either the subdivision of a spoken chain into syllables or the subdivision of the chain of meanings into significant units; *gegliederte Sprache* is used in the second sense in German. Using the second definition, we can say that what is natural to mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas. [P. 10]

One could push the inventory of analogies a long way, far beyond the programmatic and principal generalities. Since their interweaving is systematic, one may say a priori that no locus of the two discourses absolutely escapes it. For example, it suffices to accredit absolutely, here and there, the oppositions nature/convention, nature/arbitrary, animal/human or the concepts of sign (signifier/signified) or of representation (representer/represented) for the totality of the discourse to be affected systematically. The effects of such an opposition—which we know goes back further than Plato—can occasion an infinite analysis from which no element of the text escapes. By all rights, this analysis is assumed by any question, however legitimate and necessary, concerning the specificity of the effects of the same opposition in different texts. But the classical criteria of these differences ("language," "period," "author," "title and unity of the work," etc.) are even more derivative, and today have become profoundly problematical.

Within the system of the same fundamental conceptuality (fundamental, for example, at the point at which the opposition of *physis* to its others—*nomos, technē*—which opened the entire series of oppositions

nature/law, nature/convention, nature/art, nature/society, nature/freedom, nature/history, nature/mind, nature/culture, and so on has governed, throughout the "history" of its modifications, the entire thinking and language of the philosophy of science up to the twentieth century), the play of structural implications, and the mobility and complication of sedimentary layers are complex enough, and unlinear enough, for the same constraint to occasion surprising transformations, partial exchanges, subtle discrepancies, turnings backward, and so forth. Thus, for example, one may legitimately criticize certain elements of the Saussurian project only to rediscover pre-Saussurian motifs; or even criticize Saussure on the basis of Saussure or even on the basis of Rousseau. This does not prevent everything from "holding together" in a certain way within "Saussure's" discourse and in the kinship that links him to "Rousseau." Put simply, this unity of the totality must be differentiated otherwise than is usually done, if this play is to be accounted for. It is only on this condition, for example, that one is able to explain the presence in "Rousseau's" text of motifs that are indispensable to the linguists who, despite their debt to Saussure in this regard, are no less critical of his phonologism and psychologism (e.g., Louis Hjelmslev) or of his taxinomism (Chomsky).[16] It is by attending to the subtlety of these displacements that one may detect the conceptual premises of glossematics and of the theory of generative grammar in the second *Discourse* and in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages.*

One very quickly can see at work, beneath other names, the combined oppositions of the notions of "substance" and "form," of "content" and "expressions," and each of the two former applied alternately, as in glossematics, to each of the two latter. And how can we not give credit to Rousseau for everything accredited to "Cartesian linguistics"? Did not he who "began" with the Port-Royal *Logic* associate, from the very beginning, the theme of the creativity of language with the theme of a structural genesis of general grammaticality?[17]

Once more, I am not concerned with comparing the content of

16. See Louis Hjelmslev, "La Stratification du langage," in *Essais linguistiques,* Travaux du cercle linguistique de Copenhague, no. 12 (Copenhagen, 1959), p. 56, and *Prolégomènes à une théorie du langage* (Paris, 1971); and Chomsky, e.g., *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (London, 1964), pp. 23 ff.

17. For example, in the first part of the second *Discours,* when Rousseau describes the order in which is produced the "Division of the Discourse into its constitutive parts," that is, the origin of the distinction between subject and attribute, verb and noun, on the basis of a primitive indifferentiation: "They gave to each word the sense of an entire proposition. . . . Substantives at first were but so many proper names," "the infinitive—the present of the infinitive—was the only tense of the verbs, and as for adjectives, the notion of them could only have developed with great difficulty, because every adjective is an abstract word, and abstractions are painful Operations of the mind" (p. 149). Again, it goes without saying that this is the description of an order rather than of a history, although the latter distinction is no longer pertinent in a logic of supplementarity.

doctrines, the wealth of positive knowledge; I am concerned, rather, with discerning the repetition or permanence, at a profound level of discourse, of certain fundamental schemes and of certain directive concepts. And then, on this basis, of formulating questions. Questions, doubtless, about the possibility of given "anticipations," that some might ingenuously judge "astonishing." But questions too about a certain closure of concepts; about the metaphysics in linguistics or, if you will, about the linguistics in metaphysics.