

The Quasi-transcendental as the condition of possibility of Linguistics, Philosophy and Ontology - A Review of Derrida's *The Supplement of Copula*

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In 'The Supplement of Copula', Derrida attempts to save philosophy from being reduced to a linguisticism such as that espoused by Benveniste. Benveniste claims that philosophy is a language, that metaphysical categories such as that espoused by Aristotle are arbitrary and discovered by empirical necessity rather than having transcendental correspondence. Derrida argues that the very opposition between language and thought, which Benveniste attempts to reduce to language, relies on the conceptual foundations provided by philosophy, and in this sense philosophy is prior to language. Any attempts to reduce philosophy to linguisticism inevitably draws on the very oppositions and conceptual categories which philosophy provides, and hence falls back into a metaphysics it attempts to destroy. There is a category which eludes all linguistic formulations of philosophy, and this is the category of Being, the ontological foundation of philosophy which Aristotle and Heidegger defined as the basis of philosophy. It is a transcategorial function which enables the thought of both Aristotle and Benveniste, and as such is the metaphysical or ontological foundation on which their very philosophy or linguisticism is based. To escape this charge that Being precedes language, Benveniste attempts to posit the universality of the copula, which predicates identity and uses the verb 'to be', and reduces to a supplement of copula the nominal sentence, or that which does not use the verb 'to be' or designates an absence, or the empirical. Yet Derrida argues that this is a reduction of the supplement of copula to a historical accident, where it is structurally necessary. Benveniste's thought fails to account for this supplement of copula which becomes, as it were, relegated to a place outside language and philosophy in his thought, when it is in fact, structurally necessary as it enables the very transcategoriality of presence and absence to be thought. Presence cannot be predicated without the category of absence that is its conceptual opposition that enables the very possibility of the concept 'presence' and 'being' to be thought. Derrida's intervention is that ontology and linguistics has to account for this supplement of copula, which philosophy needs as its very grounds of possibility.

Derrida begins by considering the possibility of a philosophical discourse and what it would mean, asking how it would be determined as a language. It could be a natural language, a family of natural languages, or a formal code elaborated on the basis of these natural

languages. Derrida argues that such considerations cannot be elaborated without displacing philosophy as a master discourse. The very oppositions between natural language/formal language, language/speech etc are concepts derived from philosophy, and as such philosophy cannot be considered a mere linguistic discourse because it grounds the very possibility of thinking discursive formulations. Derrida argues that all attempts to reduce to philosophy to a mere linguistic discourse derive their conceptual machinery from philosophy, and as such philosophy always reappropriates for itself the discourse that delimits it.

Derrida states that attempts to consider philosophy as a discourse are not new, nor limited to linguists. He traces such an attempt to Nietzsche, who argued for liberation from the language and grammar that had enclosed us in philosophy. Nietzsche also argued that philosophy as a language operated by way of metaphor, the identification of the non-identical. Philosophy as such has always noted the arbitrariness of the sign in order to posit that language was a mere representation of truth of the signified, the sign being merely contingent and secondary to the signified. Nietzsche had noted likewise that language had to be overcome in order to arrive at truth, language being a mere illusion, contingent and arbitrary in its metaphors. Nietzsche incriminated philosophy for positing as necessary and absolute metaphors which were merely contingent and arbitrary. Heidegger likewise noted the enclosure of philosophers within a grammar which had to be overcome in order to arrive at a more authentic and original framework of truth, a meta-discourse which arrived at the formulation of thought as poetic creation. In *Being and Time* thus, Heidegger noted that truth had failed in its formulation because it had ailed by the language of metaphysics. Philosophy is thus considered by these philosophers as a language or grammar which prevents, rather than aids, the access to ontological reality or truth.

Derrida returns to the contemporary formulation of this problematic in the thought of modern linguist Benveniste, who in "Categories of Thought and Language" analyzed the limiting constraints which Greek language imposed upon the system of Aristotelian categories. Benveniste had argued that Aristotle's formulation of the transcendental categories of thought could be reduced to the categories of language in which he thought. Derrida notes the presuppositions of such a thesis. The first is that the 'reality of language' is 'unconscious', thus positing that language is internalized in the unconscious and as such thought can only operate according to the constraints of language. Derrida notes that such a presupposition operates by a tautology, for it is in the nature of anything predicated by reality to remain an unconscious phenomenon, thus noting the aporia of such a formulation,

furthermore, such operations are aporetic in the sense that attempts to limit philosophy as a discourse always borrow their conceptual machinery from philosophy. For instance, the very notion of a linguistic system, which linguists attempt to reduce philosophy to, is only made possible by metaphysics as a theory or a theory of epistemology. Derrida notes Benveniste's attempt to reduce thought to language in his metaphor of thought as a container which cannot be separated from its contents. In other words, Benveniste's argument is that language precedes thought, shapes it, and cannot be separated from it as the unconscious is structured by a language, a rather Lacanian move.

Derrida considers the presuppositions of Benveniste's thesis. The first is the conceptual opposition between language and thought, which Benveniste eventually tries to reduce to language. Derrida notes that the very possibility of such a distinction is grounded in philosophy. The second is the opposition between 'categories of thought' and 'categories of language'. This formulation, likewise, borrows the concept of 'category' from Aristotle, who grounded this conceptual opposition in Being, which is the root of both language and thought and its site of emergence. Aristotle's formulation of Being as the origin of thought and language merges this opposition between language and thought in Being so that the question of language becomes an expression of how Being is articulated. Derrida notes that the concept of a category is a mode of signification of Being. Being grounds the possibility of signification, opening language to non-language. Derrida argues that Benveniste's move to reduce thought to language can only be possible by allowing language's pretensions to thought, truth, universality, the ontological, and this move is unjustifiable, because this places language in a place exterior to Being and formulates the very notion of category as the site where Being is produced, where Derrida argues that Being is prior to both language and thought and its site of emergence. Benveniste's claim that language precedes Being as language is the site where the category of Being is produced is counter-intuitive compared to Derrida's argument that Being precedes language and founds all signification. Derrida reads Aristotle as formulating language as the expression of Being. The notion of 'category' thus, is grounded as an expression of Being and cannot be formulated outside this ontological framework. The very notions of 'language', 'category' and 'thought', language as a system, are concepts that originate from philosophy as a master-discourse and as such Benveniste's opposition between language and thought is only made possible by philosophy. Derrida also argues that Benveniste fails to consider Aristotle's transcategorial function of Being which opens language to thought and grounds the possibility of signification in his opposition of 'language' and 'thought' as if they had no prior history or did not belong to an ontological framework. In doing so, Derrida is positing the transcendental notion of 'Being' as the meta-discursive

condition of possibility for signification. This will be elaborated further in his later section on "The Transcendental and Language".

Derrida examines Benveniste's charge that Aristotle's categories are merely categories of language. Kant had likewise suggested that Aristotle had merely selected the categories as they came to his mind, thus discovering them or rather selecting them empirically. Hegel, Prantl, Hamelin had likewise charged Aristotle with empiricism. Derrida argues that to make such an allegation one would likewise have to charge Kant with discovering his transcendental categories empirically and linguistically. When Kant separates the 'faculty of judgement' from the 'faculty of thought', this to Derrida is a meta-discursive, rather than a merely discursive or grammatical move. The very charge of Kant with empiricism borrows from the philosophical category of transcendental and empirical, and as such any move to denounce philosophy as a language is doomed to repeat the metaphysics it attempts to destroy. Philosophy is thus prior to linguistics as the very notion of 'category' which Benveniste mobilizes against Aristotle is itself borrowed from philosophy. Derrida thus demonstrates his thesis that all denunciations of philosophy by linguisticism must proceed within the conceptual oppositions and tools borrowed from philosophy as a meta-discourse and is doomed to repeat the metaphysics it attempts to destroy.

In the section entitled 'Transference', Derrida examines the alleged empirical transference of categories of language to categories of thought. The linguist transcribes in terms of language what the philosopher had previously transposed or projected from language in terms of thought. Derrida argues that transcription does not amount to translation, an intra-linguistic transport of a signified from one language to another. This is because the categories of 'thought' and 'language' are not two languages but two philosophical categories, and the movement of thought to language is not mere translation but transposition and projection of the contents from one category to another. Derrida argues that Benveniste's collapsing of the distinction between thought and language in trying to reduce categories of thought to categories of language is unjustified, as these are obviously two distinct categories and concepts. This move by Derrida clarifies the 'difference' between categories of thought and categories of language and in positing philosophy as a master-discourse, categories of thought are posited as the foundations for categories of language, hence the distinction between them is sharpened by Derrida. Derrida examines Benveniste's charge that Aristotle discovered the categories by empirical necessity. This means that Aristotle confused conceivable classes of predicates, which are exterior to language, with the expression of these contents; that is he confused conception with expression, and was merely conceiving, rather than expressing transcendental categories of thought. As Derrida rightly

points out, 'empirical necessity' is a tautology as 'necessity' qualifies 'empirical', it points to the necessary discovery, albeit empirical, rather than rhapsodic formulation of the categories. 'Empirical' presupposes the separation of language from thought, to which language merely gives expression and is exterior to thought. This already suggests a contradiction in Benveniste's thought as he claims that thought is reducible to language. Language becomes the empirical shell of meaning. Derrida notes that Benveniste repeats the operation he imputes to Aristotle in distinguishing 'saying' from 'thinking' and supposing there is only an empirical relation between them, as he likewise separates language from thought. Derrida notes that the only difference is that Aristotle makes the distinction only to remain within it, as he would imagine it a matter of thinking where it is only a matter of saying; and Benveniste would maintain the distinction in order to demonstrate that subjective articulations of languages have been taken for languages of thought. Derrida thus upholds that this distinction between 'saying' and 'thinking', 'language' and 'thought', grounds the thought of both Benveniste and Aristotle, and these concepts are borrowed and can only proceed from within the grounds of philosophical discourse, yet again demonstrating his thesis that discursive denunciations of philosophy are doomed to repeat the metaphysics they attempt to destroy.

Derrida notes that the 'empirical necessity of a distinct expression' is repeated in the same text, citing the example of Chinese philosophy which may well have invented categories but nevertheless assimilates the concepts of dialectical materialism or quantum mechanics without the structure of Chinese language proving a hindrance. As Derrida rightly notes, this very citation is a demonstration that there can be contents of thought which are separable from the 'forms' of a particular language because there is a universality to the concepts of dialectical materialism or quantum mechanics which Chinese thought, as it were, discovers through 'empirical necessity' rather than rhapsodic formulation. Derrida notes the contradiction inherent in Benveniste's admission here that thought is not language, or a language. Benveniste persists in arguing that Aristotle deluded himself with the transcendental origins of his categories because he believed in a table, which he discovered only unconsciously and empirically.

Derrida notes again the paradox in acknowledging as a 'necessity' that which is merely 'empirical' as there is an obvious distinction between the random variability of the sensory implied by 'empirical' and the transcendental implication that is predicated by the word 'necessity' as this implies that these were a preceding structure that was discovered rather than rhapsodically formulated, be their origin transcendental or empirical. Derrida questions the notion of language as a mere expression of the empirical, and notes the contradiction implied in positing the mere

empiricity of signification, where this fails to account for the signification of the empirical. This signification of the empirical presupposes the structure of philosophy as a master discourse from which the linguist borrows the conceptual tools of the distinction between 'transcendental' and 'empirical' only to cleverly reduce the transcendental to the empirical by renaming it an 'empirical necessity.' Aristotle was not simply the author of the notion of the empirical, even if this concept envelops his philosophy. To displace Aristotle's formulation of the empirical would be to displace the signification of the term 'empirical' from philosophy as a master-discourse, thus particularizing what is universal, and as Derrida rightly notes, this is no easy task. Benveniste cannot undertake such a transformation without repeating the metaphysics he tries to destroy as he borrows his very conceptual machinery, namely the terms 'empiricism' and 'necessity' from philosophy, and is thus doomed to repeat the metaphysics he undertakes to destroy.

Derrida notes the weakness of the formulating as 'empirical' the 'necessity' of the categories, as it merely repeats a common philosophical objection, and demonstrates that 1) the table of categories is systematic and not rhapsodic; 2) by operating a selection in the categories of language, the table is no longer their simple carbon copy or empirical reflection.

In the section entitled 'The Transcendental and Language' Derrida argues that language has a transcendental foundation which precedes all reductions to linguisticism or the empirical, and this is the category of Being. Being is a category which is not found on the table or elsewhere, as it is the very ontological foundation of language and thought which Benveniste attempts to reduce to language. Benveniste himself concedes this when he writes that the notion of being envelops everything. Derrida defines transcendental as transcategorical. Being founds the very possibility of the notions 'category', 'language' or 'thought' and as such is the transcendental which grounds language. In order to escape the charge that Being precedes language, Benveniste emphasizes that all languages do not dispose of the verb 'to be', or the predication of identity in the form of a copula.

Derrida has five objections to this. Firstly, the copula 'does not actually signify anything', and hence it is impossible to note its presence in one language and its absence in another. Secondly, one cannot ascertain that these are 'facts of language' as no account has been given, meta-discursively, of what a language is. Derrida raises questions about the ontological implications of the copula, which unfolds language onto its exterior, thought, as Being grounds both language and thought and the copula articulates this relation. Thirdly, one cannot qualify as mere images the copula, which has remarked an opening within language, the

opening to presence of Being, to truth, the ontological unfolding of language onto thought. Fourthly, Derrida objects to the particularizing of the concept of 'Being' to a particular language with Benveniste's claim that each Greek thinker has his own account of Being. Derrida argues that the constraints imposed by language upon thought here are exaggerated, as Being is a transcategorial function which grounds the very possibility of signification, and as such there is a need to check the linguistic constraints imposed upon philosophy by linguists. Lastly, by taking Being as the transcategorial function which enables language, Derrida contradicts Benveniste's allegation that 'philosophical thought could handle, analyze, and define it just as any other concept.' Derrida argues that without the transcategoriality of 'to be' or Being, the transition between categories of language and categories of thought would have been impossible, for Aristotle or Benveniste. Derrida thus posits Being as a meta-discursive concept which founds the very possibility of thought and in this sense it is the transcendental that grounds all signification.

In the final section entitled 'The Remainder as Supplement', Derrida examines the status and meaning of the supplement of copula. Firstly, Derrida asks if there is a metaphysics outside Indo-European organization which uses the copula, if there has been a projection of metaphysics by Western thought onto other languages and nations in which there is an absence of the copula. Derrida wonders how the absence of the copula ought to be read. In doing so, Derrida is questioning the ontological foundations of the copula and if it is as universal as Benveniste argues in order to rescue his linguisticism from being displaced by Heidegger's ontology. Heidegger had formulated a similar question: if the word 'Being' did not exist in vocabulary, would it mean nothing? His answer was that as Being grounded the possibility of all signification, it is the metaphysical and ontological foundation of language and without Being, language would not exist at all. Derrida dismisses the possibility that there is an ethnocentrism to Heidegger's claim as Heidegger has posited the ontological foundations for language, and as such Being is a meta-discursive concept or transcategorial function on which language is based. It precedes obviously even the concept of 'ethnocentrism', which belongs only to language, Being is the foundation and the very grounds of possibility of the signification of this question.

Derrida examines Benveniste's attempt to rationalize the absence of the copula in certain cultures. Benveniste claims that the fact that there is a 'nominal sentence' with an absence of the verb 'to be' and that this is a universal phenomenon contradicts the fact that it has the copula as its equivalent. Benveniste claims that this contradiction collides at all points with linguistic reality without satisfying any

theoretical necessity. Benveniste thus attempts to reduce the supplement of copula to a historical accident, a mere linguistic contingency; without incorporating it into his theoretical framework, thus consigning it to absence and excluding it. Derrida asks how this does not invalidate Benveniste's affirmations on the text of the categories, as it admits a contradiction to his argument that the copula is universal and all-encompassing, and how one is to conceive that all languages dispose of an equivalent of the copula. This follows from Benveniste's attempt to exclude the supplement of copula from language and thought in his attempts to justify his charge that language precedes Being because the copula exists universally.

Derrida raises three objections to Benveniste's attempts to relegate the supplement of copula to a place outside language and thought. Firstly, the function of the 'copula' or the 'grammatical mark of identity' is absolutely distinct from the 'full-fledged' use of the verb 'to be'. This distinction between the function and the meaning of the word points out a contradiction in Benveniste's thesis that the copula grounds the ontological foundations of language. Yet Benveniste attempts to demonstrate the universality of the grammatical function of the copula with an abundance of examples, even in languages which do not possess the word 'to be' in its lexical presence.

Secondly, in all languages, a certain function comes to supplement the lexical 'absence' of the very 'to be', and in its most general form of this supplement of copula is the nominal sentence. Benveniste reduces this supplement of copula to an absence, a mere supplement, which does not contradict the universal necessity of the copula, so as to posit that the copula grounds all signification. Thirdly another common form of this supplement of copula is syntactic play with the pronoun, for example repeating it at the end of a proposition. This process of objectification leads to a constant privileging of the third person singular. Derrida notes that the hidden relationship between such a privilege and the law of the supplement of copula unfolds a problem that linguistics and ontology as such cannot but designate from afar, because they privilege presence. This problem is the transcategorial necessity that absence is the conceptual opposite of presence that is iterability ensures the functioning of metaphysics by reproducing presence in absence. Iterability ensures that presence must be produced in the non-present, or that the present must be repeated as simulacrum in the absent, in order for metaphysics to ground itself at all. The repetition of the present in the absent constitutes the quasi-transcendental and extends the domain of the transcendental as presence has to be mediated and exemplified in order for presence to be predicated. In other words, it is the quasi-transcendental which grounds signification. The quasi-transcendental is an acknowledgement of the infrastructural economy of both the

transcendental and the empirical. Derrida cites Heidegger who notes the necessity of the copula in designating Being. Derrida notes that there is a temptation thus to posit the copula as a falling, an abstraction, degradation or emptying out of the semantic plenitude of the lexeme 'to be', marking a desire for a recovery of a lost plenitude and presence, where Heidegger's question of Being becomes a question of the meaning of Being, and to reduce the supplement of copula thus to a historical accident where it is structurally necessary, as 'presence' requires its conceptual opposite 'absence' in order to be predicated. The quasi-transcendental, which Derrida posits as the transcategorical function which accounts for both categories 'presence' and absence', is what saves philosophy from this reduction of linguistics and ontology to a mere partial view of Being in privileging presence. It is the difference between presence and absence, being and non-being that is the grounds of possibility for philosophy, linguistics and ontology, and Derrida, by illuminating this, provides the powerful insight that what ontology and linguistics had excluded is its very condition of possibility. The universal condition of possibility that Derrida discovers for ontology, linguistics or philosophy is thus the quasi-transcendental, or difference.

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