

***Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences***  
**by Jacques Derrida**

**(English, U.G. 2<sup>nd</sup> Semester)**

**Q. Bring out the central idea of Jacques Derrida's *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*?**

**Ans.:** Jacques Derrida first read his paper "*Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences (1966)*" at the John Hopkins International Colloquium on "*The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*" in October 1966 articulating for the first time a post-structuralist theoretical paradigm. The lecture cum essay, *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences* introduced Jacques Derrida to the United States as well as to the English-speaking world. It throws a question on the idea of 'structure' in structuralism, and absolute truths outside a system of signs. This lecture was described by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donata to be "the first time in the United States when structuralism had been thought of as an interdisciplinary phenomenon."

Derrida begins the essay by referring to 'an event' which has 'perhaps' occurred in the history of the concept of structure, that is also a 'redoubling'. The event which the essay documents is that of a definitive epistemological break with structuralist thought, of the ushering in of post-structuralism as a movement critically engaging with structuralism and also with traditional humanism and empiricism. It turns the logic of structuralism against itself insisting that the "*structurality of structure*" itself had been repressed in structuralism. The notion of structure, even in structuralist theory has always presupposed a centre of meaning of sorts. Derrida terms this desire for a centre as 'logocentrism'. Derrida decenters this idea of structure and sign system. Derrida argues that the centre cannot be substituted: "It is the point at which substitution of contents, elements and terms is no longer possible." The history of human sciences has thereby been a process of substitution, replacement and transformation of this centre through which all meaning is to be sought — God, the Idea, the World Spirit, the Renaissance Man etc.

Derrida argues that all these attempts at ‘decentering’ were however, “trapped in a sort of circle”. This is true, according to deconstructive thought, for almost all critique of Western thought that arises from within western thought: it would inevitably be bound up with that which it questions — *“We have no language-no syntax and no lexicon-which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.”* In support of this argument, Derrida takes up the example of Saussure’s description of sign— the signifier and the signified. The part of the sign Saussure calls the concept or meaning (mental impression/association of the ‘thing’) he named, ‘signified’. The idea of what ‘Google’ is, for example, is signified. The part he calls the ‘sound-image’ (the mental ‘linguistic sign’ given to the ‘thing’) he named the ‘signifier’ — this is the sound Google’s logo creates in our minds.

Derrida next considers the theme of decentering with respect to French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s ethnology. He therefore insists on Strauss’s idea of a bricolage, “the necessity of borrowing one’s concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur.” Derrida still building on Strauss’s work, introduces the concept of totalization —“Totalization is...at one time as useless, at another time as impossible.”

Derrida concludes this seminal work which is often regarded as the post-structuralist manifesto with the hope that we proceed towards an “interpretation of interpretation” where one “is no longer turned towards the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism”. He says that we need to borrow Nietzsche’s idea of affirmation to stop seeing play as limiting and negative. Nietzsche’s pronouncement “God is dead” need not be read as a destruction of a cohesive structure, but can be seen as a chance that opens up a possibility of diverse plurality and multiplicity.