

# Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari and the Rhuthmoi of Language - Part 3

Sunday 18 July 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

## Statements and Bodies Assemblages vs Arbitrary Language System

The second “postulate of linguistics” discussed by Deleuze and Guattari affirmed that “there is an abstract machine of the tongue [*la langue*] that does not appeal to any ‘extrinsic’ factor” (pp. 85-91). Indeed, the idea of an ontological independence of language from the world had been one of the most fundamental and constant affirmations of linguistics during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the time, this idea was justified by the arbitrariness of the sign vis-à-vis the thing or the idea to which it referred, which dated from the early days of Greek philosophy, and by the systemic character of languages or tongues, underlined for the first time by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).

To oppose the first point, Deleuze and Guattari quoted the Stoic argument concerning the relation between “the corporeal modifications,” which resulted whether from the actions or from the passions of the bodies (in a general sense), and the series of statements which were supposed to describe them. Just as the “regimes of signs” and the “regimes of powers” described in Chapter 3, those two series were not associated through a referential relationship, likely to be qualified as arbitrary, but through an active “intervention” of the speaker into the states of things.

We cannot even say that the body or state of things is the “referent” of the sign. In expressing the noncorporeal attribute, and by that token attributing it to the body, one is not representing or referring but *intervening* in a way; it is a speech act. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 86)

The discourse did not “represent” the modifications of the bodies but was used to pragmatically “anticipate or move back,” “slow down or speed up,” “separate or combine” them. Its instantaneous transformations was always “inserted into the woof of the continuous modifications” of the things.

The independence of the two kinds of forms, forms of expression and forms of content, is not contradicted but confirmed by the fact that the expressions or expresseds are inserted into or intervene in contents, not to represent them but to anticipate them or move them back, slow them down or speed them up, separate or combine them, delimit them in a different way. The warp of the instantaneous transformations is always inserted into the woof of the continuous modifications. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 86)

But this relation was symmetrical. The bodies or the things intervened as well in the succession of statements or signs. There was a “reciprocal presupposition” between the order of words and the order of things.

Signs are at work in things themselves just as things extend into or are deployed through signs. [...] In short, the functional independence of the two forms is only the form of their reciprocal presupposition, and of the continual passage from one to the other. [...] the independence of the two lines is distributive, such that a segment of one always forms a relay with a segment of the other, slips into, introduces itself into the other. We constantly pass from order-words to the “silent order” of things, as Foucault puts it, and vice versa. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 87)

Simultaneously, both lines were submitted to movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Sometimes bodies and things were active and induced changes in statements and signs, sometimes it was the opposite.

A criminal action may be deterritorializing in relation to the existing regime of signs (the earth cries for revenge and crumbles beneath my feet, my offense is too great); but the sign that expresses the act of condemnation may in turn be deterritorializing in relation to all actions and reactions (“a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth” [Gen. 4:12], you cannot even be killed). In short, there are degrees of deterritorialization that quantify the respective forms and according to which contents and expression are conjugated, feed into each other, accelerate each other, or on the contrary become stabilized and perform a reterritorialization. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 87-88)

Consequently, the relationship between statements and states of things was not based on representation—and therefore liable of a characterization as arbitrary—but on a pragmatic conjunction of “their quanta of relative deterritorialization, each intervening, operating in the other.”

In short, the way an expression relates to a content is not by uncovering or representing it. Rather, forms of expression and forms of content communicate through a conjunction of their quanta of relative deterritorialization, each intervening, operating in the other. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 88)

This analysis, which resumed with that elaborated in Chapter 3, used the concept of “assemblage” to oppose that of the arbitrariness of the sign. Indeed, if statements and states of things were closely linked with each other but in continuous parallel movements that made them constantly shift vis-à-vis one another within changing assemblages, they could not be related, so to speak, point to point, either by a motivated nor even by an arbitrary relation. Provided that the point to point model was dismissed, this kind of relation might be characterized, though, as “hyperarbitrary,” that is, arbitrary not only according to “conventions” but to constantly shifting ones. In short, this conclusion radicalized the concept of arbitrariness and extended it beyond its semiotic binary limitations.

Ironically, this met with what Saussure—who had been most improperly rejected from the start—had tried to figure out when he had characterized the sign as “radically arbitrary.” In fact, in Saussure’s perspective, arbitrariness should not be confused with mere “convention” because the association of the signifier and the signified is never willingly chosen, because it is the result of an unconscious and collective behavior, and because of “the action of time” which constantly transforms it (for more details, see Michon, 2010, Chap. 5).

After the discussion of the Stoic theory concerning the complex relation between the succession of statements and the transformations of bodies, supposed to substitute the reductive theory of the arbitrariness of the sign, Deleuze and Guattari turned to the modern theory of language as “structure” or “system,” which emerged in Continental linguistics with Saussure’s interpretations in the 1920s and 1930s, but also developed in American linguistics with Chomsky in the 1950s and 1960s. Unlike the “tongue,” which was closed in on itself, any assemblage included interacting bodies as well as statements attributing to these bodies some transformations. Moreover, any assemblage was constantly submitted to territorialization and deterritorialization dynamics.

On the one hand it is a *machinic assemblage* of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a *collective assemblage of enunciation*, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies. Then on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both *territorial sides*, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and *cutting edges of deterritorialization*, which carry it away. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 88)

Here, Deleuze and Guattari introduced additional considerations concerning the common Marxist view of language which was not truly part of linguistics but which reflected, so to speak, symmetrically from sociology and economics, some linguistic biases. The heterogeneous figure of “assemblage” allowed to challenge simultaneously two opposite views, yet equally incomplete: the one granting to “the production of goods” primacy over “statements,” as in Marxism; the other granting it to “the productivity of language,” as in phonology or Chomskyan linguistics (p. 90). Each perspective, in its own way, made impossible to understand the role of the “extrinsic factors,” whether by exaggerating them and reducing language to nothing, or by suppressing them altogether and making language entirely autonomous.

In mainstream Marxism, the direct “reflection” of social contradictions by the statements could not account for the complexity concerning their “form” itself. Like for Meschonnic, literary and artistic discourses, for instance—but it was the same for any other kind of statement—could not be simply flattened onto the so-called “economic base.” Statements were largely “independent” from the latter.

It would be an error to believe that content determines expression by causal action, even if expression is accorded the power not only to “reflect” content but to react upon it in an active way. This kind of ideological conception of the statement, which subordinates it to a primary economic content, runs into all kinds of difficulties inherent to dialectics. [...] We must recognize that expression is independent and that this is precisely what enables it to react upon contents. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 89)

Mainstream Marxism actually reduced economy to an abstract scheme of production and similarly ideology to an abstract scheme of expression. Therefore, society's contradictions were brought down to a simplistic and reified opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie, while language was abusively and naively considered as a neutral linguistic means of communication equally available to all and "exempt from struggle and conflict."

If contents are said to be economic, the form of content cannot be said to be economic and is reduced to a pure abstraction, namely, the production of goods and the means of that production considered in themselves. Similarly, if expressions are said to be ideological, the form of expression is not said to be ideological and is reduced to language as abstraction, as the availability of a good shared by all. Those who take this approach claim to characterize contents and expressions by all the struggles and conflicts pervading them in two different forms, but these forms themselves are exempt from struggle and conflict, and the relation between them remains entirely indeterminate. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 89)

In a transparent allusion to Gabriel Tarde (1869-1904), whose sociology was to be introduced further below (p. 218) as an alternative to Marx's, they described the actual material aspect of assemblages as "intermingling of bodies" including "attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and expansions that affect bodies of all kinds in their relations to one another." (on Tarde, see Michon, [2005] 2016, Chap. 3)

We think the material or machinic aspect of an assemblage relates not to the production of goods but rather to a precise state of intermingling of bodies in a society, including all the attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and expansions that affect bodies of all kinds in their relations to one another. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 90)

Phonology and generative grammar met with symmetrical difficulties. Whether "as signifying phonological structure, or as a deep syntactical structure," the tongue was reduced to "a synchronic set of constants," which accounted for the production of meaningful statements without any mention to pragmatic aspects, or in the best cases, considering them as unessential adjuvant.

The other mistake (which is combined with the first as needed) is to believe in the adequacy of the form of expression as a linguistic system. This system may be conceived as a signifying phonological structure, or as a deep syntactical structure. In either case, it is credited with engendering semantics, therefore of fulfilling expression, whereas contents are relegated to the arbitrariness of a simple "reference" and pragmatics to the exteriority of nonlinguistic factors. What all of these undertakings have in common is to erect an *abstract machine of [the tongue][la langue]*, but as a synchronic set of constants. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 90, my mod.)

Consequently, structural and systemist linguistics, whatever their orientation, could only superimpose their "arborescent model" on the flow of statements and miss the rhizomatic nature of

language production.

Chomsky's abstract machine retains an arborescent model and a linear ordering of linguistic elements in sentences and sentence combinations. But as soon as pragmatic values or internal variables are taken into account, in particular with respect to indirect discourse, one is obliged to bring "hypersentences" into play or to construct "abstract objects" (incorporeal transformations). This implies superlinearity, in other words, a plane whose elements no longer have a fixed linear order: the rhizome model. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 91)

By contrast with all structuralist or systemist theories, whether in economics or linguistics, primacy should be granted to assemblages of statements and bodies and their respective movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The changing and heterogeneous assemblages constituted the only significant and meaningful reality.

An assemblage has neither base nor superstructure, neither deep structure nor superficial structure; it flattens all of its dimensions onto a single plane of consistency upon which reciprocal presuppositions and mutual insertions play themselves out. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 90)

By way of conclusion, Deleuze and Guattari recommended taking "abstraction" further, to the paradoxical point that it could account for unexpected results, of new lateral lines of flight escaping the systemic model. Morin had previously suggested that unpredictable contents would always emerge from information systems mistakenly considered as closed in on themselves. However, he contented himself with noting this phenomenon and left linguistics aside. Deleuze and Guattari tried to explain them by suggesting to place pragmatics at the center of linguistics itself, that is, to recognize that language was pragmatic per se.

We will not object that the machine thus conceived is too abstract. On the contrary, it is not abstract enough, it remains "linear." [...] But if the abstraction is taken further, one necessarily reaches a level where the pseudoconstants of [the tongue]/[la langue] are superseded by variables of expression internal to enunciation itself; these variables of expression are then no longer separable from the variables of content with which they are in perpetual interaction. *If the external pragmatics of nonlinguistic factors must be taken into consideration, it is because linguistics itself is inseparable from an internal pragmatics involving its own factors.* (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 90-91)

In fact, this conclusion proved Benveniste right: the pragmatic context, the actions and bodies which provided the framework of enunciation should be taken into consideration on the very account of the intrinsic activity of the language, what they themselves called "the internal pragmatics" of language. Unfortunately, just like Serres, because of their strange prejudice against him, they did not recognize this obvious contact point with the latest and most innovative linguistics.

[Next chapter](#)