opposite perspective from which it was produced; and there is a fair amount of wrangling over which are the most productive, most valid, most correct methods of scholarship. But it is important that we see these misunderstandings, these conflicts, as positive, that we use them to define and understand our own perspective better, if we want to advance knowledge in the field of writing research.

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Talking Differently: A Response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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Michel Foucault taught us to talk about history in terms of shifting discourses rather than in terms of transcendental master-narratives. Instead of talking about history as an epic story of one kind or another—for example, as a story about our climb up the ladder of knowledge, or about our emancipation from old bad ways of thinking—Foucault asks us to think about history as changes in the way we employ vocabularies: once we talked like that; now we talk like this. In his writings, Foucault continually reminds us of the common sense observation that the world does not tell us how to talk. As Richard Rorty puts it, “The fact that Newton’s vocabulary lets us predict the world more easily than Aristotle’s does not mean that the world speaks Newtonian. The world does not speak. Only we do” (6). When we begin to talk about history—and knowledge, too—in terms of shifts in vocabularies, we no longer need to worry about the Cartesian or what is now called the internalist problem of matching up our vocabularies to something that exists outside of our own subjectivity. Consequently, we can get rid of the notion that language mediates between us and the world, for human being (human being-in-the-world) does not consist in striving for eternal truth or for ahistorical facts that exist “out there” beyond the vocabularies we employ to get things done in our everyday lives. In other words, when we stop talking about a split world—a world possessing an intrinsic nature set apart from an internal realm of mental states—and, instead, start talking about how we employ our vocabularies, we can get beyond essentialism and stop imagining
that words possess a transcendental essence beyond the everyday pragmatic uses we give them.

**Toward an Externalist Vocabulary**

In her interview with *JAC*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak brings this Foucaultian lesson to life. In her responses, she refuses to employ an internalist vocabulary even when she is prodded in that direction by her interviewers. For example, when she is invited to “conceptualize” rhetoric, when she is invited to define rhetoric and reveal to us its essential meaning, Spivak demurs. She tells us that if we really need an essentialist definition we might try on Paul de Man’s anti-definition: rhetoric is a name, a name of “that which is the limit—that which escapes, that which is the residue of efforts at ‘catching’ things with systems” (298). Because rhetoric is the name we give to that which we cannot name, “that which escapes” our systems for naming, Spivak reminds us that rhetoric, within an internalist vocabulary, cannot be “conceptualized” at all. By citing this anti-definition, she provides a living reminder that so long as we keep talking about transcendental categories, about conceptualizing names to correspond to things as they really are “out there,” names will forever escape the systems we employ in order to pin down the meanings of names. In her responses, Spivak demonstrates that when we insist on employing an internalist vocabulary, we can never avoid the problems of skepticism and relativism. If we continue to talk in internalist terms and if we continue to insist that facts and truths exist independently of the words we employ to talk about these facts and truths, then we can never be sure that we are getting the correct facts and truths. Internalism leads directly to aporia, and so long as we hold to an internalist conception of language and meaning, we will find ourselves helplessly pursuing answers to unanswerable questions like, “How can we be sure that we have the true definition of rhetoric?” or “What is the essence of good writing?”

Spivak suggests that we would be better off if we stopped our internalist talk and started talking as an externalist, like Derrida, talks. When asked what rhetoric is, an externalist replies simply that rhetoric is what rhetoricians do. Plainly, if we insist on embracing the claim that words possess essences, this kind of response will appear to be a textbook example of tautology. However, if we stop talking about meaning in terms of a split between something in our heads—what Donald Davidson calls a “conceptual scheme”—and something outside our heads to which meaning refers, this response represents the only definition of rhetoric that we need. Within an externalist horizon, rhetoric is the activity pursued by people called rhetoricians, and, for the most part, rhetoricians talk about the production and reception of discourse in much the same way that physicians talk about healing, judges talk about jurisprudence, or physicists talk about the physical world. Of course, all rhetoricians do not talk in precisely the same way about what they do, just as all physicians, judges, or physicists do not talk in the same
way, and there is no reason why they should. So when asked, "How do you conceptualize rhetoric, both as an activity and as a discipline?" Spivak's response is couched in precisely the right vocabulary. As a good externalist and Derridean, Spivak says that she "can't really comment on what goes on in the discipline of rhetoric" because she has been teaching in a comparative literature department; as a result, she cannot tell us what we rhetoricians do and, therefore, cannot define rhetoric in a very precise way (294). Following Derrida, Spivak refuses to employ the word rhetoric in an internalist way that "enables one to put together a body of definitions as something to be applied." Rhetoricians define rhetoric in their myriad disciplinary and public acts. Why should we want to "conceptualize" rhetoric?

Spivak provides another good demonstration of how to talk Derridean when she is asked about the distinction between theory and practice and whether she sees Aristotle's concept of techne as a deconstruction of the theory/practice binary. In her response, Spivak addresses two senses of the term binary opposition: the Derridean/externalist sense and the Cartesian/internalist sense. She explains that, in the Derridean sense, binary oppositions will always be with us and we should not worry too much about them. She says that an opposition represents a continual reminder of the other, a voice within all our discourses that says, "Look here you, you know you are dependent upon me and you're ignoring it." For an externalist, then, oppositions serve to remind us of the openness of discourse, a reminder of what Bakhtin calls the "addressivity" of language-in-use. Only in the internalist sense of binary opposition do we run into the problems suggested by the interviewers' question. Only when we imagine that language constitutes a system of some sort that represents a world "out there," or when we imagine that language constitutes a self-enclosed world of its own, or when we imagine that language mediates between us and the world do we imagine that deconstruction overcomes oppositions. Spivak points out very clearly that deconstruction has nothing to do with destroying oppositions, the kind of thing that internalists imagine must be going on when binary oppositions are mentioned. In the internalist sense of the term, a binary opposition comes into being only when we think of language as a system, langue as opposed to parole or something akin to this sort of bifurcation. In her response, Spivak explains that once we suppose a binary opposition to be an element of a language system, we are trapped; we can never escape the system. A term like techne that we employ to mediate between the opposition of theory and practice, in the vain hope that we can get rid of the opposition, only leads inexorably to other oppositions, other systems, and other "hierarchizations."

Spivak suggests (and I agree wholeheartedly) that binary oppositions have received too much press. In fact, I would like to see us stop talking altogether about binary oppositions and about language as a system, and, following the example of Davidson and Derrida, drop a vocabulary that
describes language as a structure, conventional framework, system of intentional speech-acts, semiotic system, system of binary relations, and so forth. I would like to see us become strong externalists and accept Davidson’s conclusion that “there is no such thing as a language”:

I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases. And we should try again to say how convention in any important sense is involved in language; or, as I think, we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions.

I believe that Spivak, through Derrida’s influence, arrives at this same conclusion. For example, she tells us that when we think about a problem like the relation between theory and practice we should not think of the problem in terms of a language model. Language is not a model that we can employ to settle our differences. We should not suppose that disagreements and differences in life correspond to oppositions in language; nor should we suppose that our problems can be “mediated”—as we imagine binary oppositions to be—so that we can “maintain a more productive dialogue in which we seek to recognize rather than suppress our differences.” Spivak explains once again that mediations built on the model of language will be always “interested” and hierarchic. When we conceive of a language system that is motivated by binary oppositions, mediation leads to further interested oppositions, and no matter how much we yearn for an essentialist heaven beyond the cycle of mediation after mediation, we will never find relief from the system we impose on ourselves, a system constructed on an internalist model of language.

I believe that Spivak shows us a better way to talk about the “reversal of the theory/practice hierarchy” in composition theory. She tells us that we should historicize the problem and not reduce it to a question about language. She explains that theory and practice are disciplinary and institutional matters and not linguistic ones: “I think we should make use of the fact that our institutional system of education emphasizes committee structures, and, therefore, we should open and reopen these questions constantly” (297). If, as Phillip Sipiora and Janet Atwill suggest, “Some compositionists speak out against what they see as a new privileging of theory in composition studies,” we rhetoricians must settle the issue within the discourses of our discipline and our institutions (296). No totalizing theory of language, no epistemology in the Cartesian sense, will help us.

A Momentary Lapse

In most of her responses, Spivak talks as a good externalist should, but in one of her responses she demonstrates how easy it is to lapse into an
internalist vocabulary. In their penultimate question, Sipiora and Atwill ask Spivak to address a very specific pedagogical concern: whether in specialized courses students should be taught to write for general audiences or whether they should be taught “to address audiences familiar with specialized jargon, grammars, and methodologies” (303). Spivak responds that she might be “old-fashioned” in her views about this issue. When she employs the term “old-fashioned,” Spivak displays her uncertainty about how to employ an externalist vocabulary in a discipline not her own; she confesses that she might be talking in a way that externalists no longer talk. And she is right. Spivak lapses into an internalist vocabulary when she speaks of writing as a skill that can be taught outside the discourses where writing occurs: “I think there have to be places where you do nothing but the skill, and then the application of the skill develops” (303). According to this internalist sense of discourse production, writing is a technique (like riding a bike) that once learned can be applied automatically in many different situations. To talk this way, however, presupposes that writing constitutes an epistemological and ahistorical process and that once we internalize this process, all we need to do is apply it to different communicative contexts. As Spivak suspects when she calls her views “old fashioned,” externalists should not talk this way about writing, and I would like to think that Spivak might not talk this way again if she could get another shot at the question. However, since she cannot get another shot at the question, I would like to offer (at the risk of seeming presumptuous) the kind of response that I wish Spivak had given.

From an externalist perspective, this pedagogical concern about audience begs the question about the teaching of writing. Sipiora and Atwill assume in their question that writing can be taught. For me, the question is not whether we should teach to specific or generalized audiences in specialized courses, but whether it is possible to teach writing at all. I do not believe that writing can be taught in any specialized course because writing is not a skill. Writing is not a system that can be internalized, although the scrawls we make in order to write obviously do form a system and, therefore, can be taught. However, these scrawls should not be confused with writing. Producing words and sentences does not constitute writing. Monkeys and machines produce organized scrawls, but they do not write. Writing presupposes a shared public language, so writing requires other people. Without at least one other person, there can be no language. Just as no private language exists, no private writing exists. Writing, therefore, cannot be reduced to a private cognitive process.

Hilary Putnam writes that “meanings ain’t in the head”; well, neither is writing (227). An inner world of intentional mental states or of cognitive processes cannot account for writing or for any other kind of language use; instead, language use, such as writing, produces our sense of an inner world filled with intentional mental states and cognitive processes. Because we do not learn a writing system (since there is no writing “system” to learn) writing
is hermeneutic and not epistemological in nature, and it cannot be separated from the public world in which we live. To write means to exist in the world. When we accept this paralogic conception of rhetoric, teachers in every course across the curriculum become therapists in the sense that they help students develop their own responses to an other, and writing becomes a collaborative and hermeneutic activity that we employ to interpret one another and, in turn, to get things done in the world.

This reply, then, resembles generally the kind of answer that I wish Spivak had given to this particular question. Of course, I believe that Spivak gave the response she did because she lapsed into internalist talk, but, in the big picture, Spivak’s answer to this one question does not detract from the image she projects in this interview. In her responses to Sipiora and Atwill, as well as in her important books and translations, Spivak emerges as someone who shows us how to talk in a different way and to say more interesting things about language, literature, and culture. Clearly, her kind of talk employs a vocabulary that we do not associate readily with the vocabularies employed by most contemporary rhetoricians—vocabularies steeped in cognitivism, Kantian subjectivism, and Kuhnian constructionism. So Spivak’s vocabulary—derived from a tradition represented by Nietzsche, Dewey, Heidegger, the later Wittgenstein, Quine, Rorty, and, most of all, Davidson and Derrida—often sounds strange to internalist ears.

Obviously, I believe our discipline would be better served if we dropped our internalist talk and adopted an externalist vocabulary along the lines of those provided by Davidson and Derrida. In more pragmatic terms, I believe our discipline would be better served if we talked more about discourse production and reception as hermeneutic activities and stopped talking about them—or, at least, stopped talking so much about them—as systemic processes of one kind or another. As a consequence of this shift in vocabularies, we would stop worrying about constructing totalizing internalist epistemologies and, as a result, stop worrying about reducing discourse production and reception to a body of knowledge that can be taught. Instead, we would start worrying first about better ways to collaborate and to work with others and second about better ways to structure our institutions so that the hermeneutic acts of writing and reading are not segregated in composition and literature courses where writing and reading become separated from the communicative interaction occurring in other courses within the university. In her JAC interview, Spivak shows us how we might begin to talk differently about issues like these, and we should listen carefully to the way she talks.

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