

# **An Overseas Interpretation on the Discrimination of Speech and Meaning of Chinese Poetics --A Comparison of the Views of Derrida, Taoists and Madhyamika on Language by Chinese Scholars in North America as an Example**

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**Abstract:** Philosophical research has started to mainly focus on exploring language and meaning since the linguistic turn in Western philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This echoes the "discrimination of speech and meaning" originating in traditional Chinese philosophy across time and space. A group of overseas Chinese scholars who are attempting to give voice to Chinese poetics have regarded this as an opportunity for dialogue between Chinese and Western theories. Xi Mi, Cai Zongqi and Ye Weilian developed comparative interpretations of the issue of "speech and meaning". By comparing Derrida's theory of deconstruction with the Daoist and Madhyamika views of language, they pointed out the commonality of their "distrust" of language which was considered inexhaustible in terms of meaning. However, they also sorted out a variety of ways in which each theory "banishes" language and ultimately presents different results of linguistic deconstruction. As revealed by a comparison of linguistic perspectives under several theoretical frameworks, the "paradox of speech and meaning" starting from the same point of view leads to disparate conclusions. The reason for these differences lies in the diverse understandings of the ultimate metaphysical connotation that "meaning" refers to (being Tao and Sunyata). Their comparative interpretations have expanded the perspective of scholars in the mainland of China on the proposition of "the discrimination of speech and meaning" and enriched its original meaning. Besides, the traditional poetic proposition is given room for dialogue with other theories.

**Keywords:** : Discrimination of Speech in Meaning; North American Chinese Scholars; Deconstruction; Daoism; Madhyamika

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Traditional Chinese philosophy is rich in discussions of the relationship between speech and meaning. The academic community has become familiar with a series of poetic discussions developed from the Taoist relationship between speech and meaning. Interestingly, the exploration of language and meaning has also turned into a major focus of philosophical research and naturally influenced the field of poetics since the linguistic

turn in modern Western philosophy. This seems to form an inter-temporal interplay with the traditional Chinese discussion of “speech and meaning”. The scholarly community has also keenly realized this opportunity for communication between the East and the West. The attention to Derrida's theory of deconstruction in China gradually heated up in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Shei & Gao, 2018). At present, domestic scholars have focused more on the comparative discussion between deconstructionism and Zhuangzi's thought. The common feature of "the negation and criticism of tradition and fixed order" between the two was pointed out and used as the main entry point for the dialogue between Chinese and Western theories (Tao et al., 2017). Apart from Zhuangzi, the Zhong Guan school of thought, which also exerted a significant impact on the issue of meaning and speech in the history of Chinese literary criticism, shares similarities with deconstructionism as well. Moreover, the analysis of detailed issues like the deconstruction path of the relationship between meaning and speech and the characteristics of each school of deconstruction remains relatively lacking at the micro level. These aspects have been supplemented by the research of overseas Chinese scholars. Developing the comparative interpretations and constructions of the issue of "speech-meaning" in the early 1980s, Xi Mi, Cai Zongqi, Ye Weilian and other Chinese scholars have been pioneers in bridging the gap between deconstructionism and ancient Chinese theories. They took the relationship between speech and meaning as the basis for comparing the strategies of dealing with the relationship between language and meaning under the background of Chinese and Western views of language. Not only this, the commonalities and nuances behind them were discovered.

According to their discovery, the relationship between “speech” and “meaning” is inherently one of the unequal references, and language is always difficult to exhaust the meaning. Therefore, the use of language itself is fraught with difficulties and requires care to avoid falling into a cycle of “paradox of meaning”. Nevertheless, this dilemma has precisely led them to extend the paths of the various schools of thought towards the resolution of the paradox of meaning and speech. In addition, the deconstruction of the denotative structure of "language-meaning" by the various schools of thought was indicated, and the "similarities" and "differences" in the process of deconstruction were identified. Their comparative interpretations expanded the original understanding of the proposition of "discrimination of speech and meaning" in Chinese scholarship to a new dimension.

## 2. DERRIDA AND TAOISM'S DISSOLUTION OF THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN SPEECH AND MEANING

The Taoist view of language has had a profound influence on traditional Chinese philosophy and poetics. Some scholarly discussions on the category of “speech and meaning” begin with the early Taoist discourse on attitudes towards language. The linguistic turn in the development of Western philosophy has also significantly affected the academic world, with numerous theoretical schools challenging the traditional Western conceptions of language. Derrida, a post-modernist thinker, critiqued and deconstructed the logocentric notion of Western “speech-centered” (or phonocentric) representation, rethinking the question of the “linguistic representation of being”. Amid the “deconstruction” frenzy, scholars found some similarities between the approach of Derrida to language and the Chinese Taoist thinking on the relation between speech and meaning. As a Chinese scholar, Xi Mi tried to compare and contrast the two in the early 1980s, providing a way to probe into the dialogue between Chinese and Western views of the language across history and culture. With a rebellious approach to their ideological claims, both Derrida and Taoism offered a critique of “center” and “discrimination” in their conceptions of language. This interoperability of domains reflects what both schools of thought have in common: rejecting the dichotomy of thinking. Derrida's theory of deconstruction consists in denying the notion of an a priori and fixed meaning of existence and the consequent “speech/writing” distinction in the realm of language. Taoism negates the distinction arising from language and the destruction of the original integrity of things resulting from discrimination. In his analysis of the two positions, Xi Mi noticed that their rejection of “dichotomy” can be communicated on two levels: First, it is Derrida's critique of the “speech center” as well as Taoism's claim of “non-dialecticism”. Second, it is a similarity between Derrida's concept of “complementarity” and Zhuangzi's strategy of “difference”. The first is the challenge to the “speech center” and the denial of the “dialectical” act that roots in language. The language was used by Derrida as an entry point for his critique of the Western philosophical tradition. He argued that it has formed a single system from Plato to Hegel and from Aristotle to Heidegger, and is on the basis of the fundamental notion of “to have is to be” (Veg, 2019). The entire Western philosophical tradition is based on the various meanings of “being”, such as “truth”, “essence” and “ontology”. Such meanings all point to an “ultimate” and “central” nature, which expresses a perfect state of being. “Ruling and

regulating Western thought" (Chi & Wang, 2000), this dichotomous mode of thought is reflected in the notion of language, which gives rise to a distinction between "speech/text" and "language". In the old Western view of language, speech were deemed as closer to actual meaning because they could be spoken anytime to express the mind just like thought per se. However, words are lagging behind and they were representations of representations and "screened out transparent thought" (Li, 2018), thus creating the dichotomy of the superiority of words over words. As pointed out by Derrida, this "speech-centrism" is inextricably linked to "truth-centrism", which is pursued by metaphysical ideas. Derrida dismantled the oppositional structure of "speech/text" for the purpose of dismantling this inherent philosophical model. Additionally, he pointed to the inherent contradictions of Saussure's semiotic theory in a theoretical "self-deconstruction" by drawing on it. Saussure defined language as a system of signs and argued that conventional arguments express their function as signs. In light of his semiotic theory, each sign is defined by its differences from other signs rather than its basic qualities. Derrida noted the assertion in this theory that "only differences without definiteness exist", stating that the sign is the product of a system of differences and only the result of differences instead of an entity in itself. In a linguistic system, thus, both speech and writing require referring to differences and relations with other elements of the system to function. The connection and interweaving of signs and symbols form texts. As a larger sign, texts also depend on differences and relations with other texts in the corresponding system to produce meaning and other elements in an infinite cycle. In this way, only differences and traces of meaning are ubiquitous in the linguistic system. The only traces of differences and the meanings they generate are omnipresent in the language system. At this point, Derrida dismantled the suppression of words by speech. "Speech-centeredness" and "words as representations of speech" are no longer valid if the production of meaning is only a matter of difference between signs. Xi Mi stated that the above analysis of Derrida exposed a theoretical contradiction in Saussure's linguistics: Saussure insisted on a "speech-centered" position and rejected words. His semiotic analysis contradicted this, on the other hand, counteracting the premise that "speech is the goal of linguistic research". Derrida's critique of "speech-centeredness" is actually a deconstruction of "metaphysics" in Western philosophy since the existence of "being" relies on the opposite of "non-being". The existence of "being" is dependent on a relative relationship with "non-being". As a result, the complete "being" is a purely fictional matter (Coleman & Chou, 2013). By removing "speech"

from its supremacy, Derrida thus dissolved both the “speech center” and, with it, the perfect “being” previously thought to be directly representable by speech. It can be argued that speech does not directly embody meaning anymore, as believed by the Western tradition. However, meaning arising out of the difference between symbols (both phonetic and written) and signs, and the understanding of language from this perspective has already implied that “speech is not directly representable”. Moreover, Taoism criticizes the implicit intention of language to “discriminate” by means of the negation of “debate”. Taoist thought advocates the “removal of names”, but this act is an implicit recognition of the role of names in referring to things. Furthermore, Taoists hold that “names” will bring about the crisis of “debate”. Xi Mi asserted that Zhuangzi first recognized the language as a conventional and systematic tool for distinguishing and categorizing the real world, a concept represented by “names”. Beyond that, he thought that to give a thing a name means pointing out its distinction from other things. Hence, language is rife with dichotomous oppositions (Ho, 2020). Dichotomy also refers to exclusion. The determination of an idea is accompanied by the exclusion of its opposite idea, which is how the nature of division arises: good and evil, beautiful and ugly, etc. Xi maintained that Taoism rejects this kind of behavior based on the value judgments attached to language. The reason is that the dichotomy in language invariably forms an indexical or conceptual structure that determines the attitudes and inclinations of people (Lu, 2008). This sense of opposition and division is what Taoists call “dialectic”, a distinction bringing about preferences and desires. The human heart is suspended in a constant sway of artificially opposed ideas, “the heart is comforted and sunken if between heaven and earth, and interests and harms are intertwined...” (Zhang, 2023). Taoism's opposition to “dialectic” insinuates a view of language, namely opposition to the constraints imposed on man by language. Ye Weilian's exposition of Taoists' intellectualism echoed the view of Xi Mi. This is because Ye not only saw the governance of people's knowledge and karma by language but also reckoned that Taoists use “speechlessness” and “pseudonymity” to avoid being trapped in the subconscious of “argumentation” (Chen & Ji). As Lao Tzu said, “I do not know my name. Therefore, I call it Tao, and Da by a strong name” (Chen, 2018). Temporary sexual force is used for pointing to the meaning itself in words, but this is only a pseudonym unlike the “name” with “debate”, which is ultimately swept away as it is said instead of being stagnated. Derrida's deconstruction of the “speech center” and Taoism's rejection of the “dialectic” produced by language both break down a

dichotomous division of things, which is the first aspect of their critique of dichotomy. The second aspect of the critique of dichotomy is manifested in the two similar ideas put forward by both Derrida and Taoism: complementarity and difference. Complementarity is a concept that Derrida introduced in his analysis of Rousseau's work when suggesting that "education" is the complement of "talent" and completes it. Nonetheless, Derrida believed that "education" reveals the incompleteness of "gift" perceived as a "self-sufficient being". This is because "gift" is intrinsically deficient and hence needs to be filled by "education". It can be seen that supplementation is intended to complete something and "compensate for some defect in what is believed to be complete" (Li, 2018). When embodied in language, this logic of supplementation is interpreted in this way: Words are (in accordance with the traditional view of language) an attachment and supplement to speech precisely because speech has certain defects that turn words into a supplement and make them complete (Wagner, 2019). By analyzing some texts of Rousseau, Derrida claimed that what is considered real life in a work is nonexistent except for the text and so-called real life happens only when sought to be supplemented. For this reason, the so-called "ontology" does not exist a priori either, which thus is dissolved, followed by the deconstruction of the idea of dichotomy. In Zhuangzi's text, Xi Mi found the idea of "difference" which is akin to "complementarity". In Zhuangzi's texts, it is not uncommon to invert two opposing elements. Such two elements are like the untalented wood of a mountain (A tree useless to a woodcutter is used to "enjoy its heavenly life") and the difference in size between a roc and a cicada (the difference in size between the two patterns-what is natural and necessary for the roc is out of reach for the cicada and the roc is unattainable for the cicada)...These seemingly class-opposite concepts are inverted to reveal a deeper meaning. That is to say, all values are non-essential and relative, and their significance is disclosed by the opposite of their opposites. Zhuangzi discussed this phenomenon by saying, "if looking at the difference, we see that everything is big because it is big, and small because it is small. The difference is seen when the tares of heaven and earth are known and hair is known as a hill and mountain". Xi Mi stated that what Zhuangzi called "difference" is precisely a strategy of deconstruction. Starting from the internal structure of things, he believed that the so-called superior side is involved in the inferior side, and is limited by the latter, thereby uncovering the limits of dichotomy. Through the concept of "difference", Zhuangzi showed the dissolution of two aspects of the law of dichotomy: The first one is interdependence and the inability to exist on its own (It is also close

if it is not he without a self and I taking nothing). The second one is the infinite cycle of the two beings derived from each other (He is also due to him if from him. The other is also said to be the source of birth). By this means, things can be created and evolved. It can be seen that the Taoist approach to things has a mutually dialectical and deductive perspective which dissolves and transcends dichotomous structure. As believed by Xi Mi, the notion of "difference" reveals mutual complementarity and revelation within things, which echoes Derrida's notion of "complementarity". The above discussion indicated that both Derrida and Taoism began by breaking down the traditional notion of dichotomous structure. In the process of deconstruction, they reflected on the connection between language and existence (meaning). As Xi Mi put it, their apparent negation and rebellion foreshadow the "spirit of total freedom and creation" that follows the break. After removing distinction, Derrida gave language the space to be infinitely extended and speak of meaning, while Taoism goes beyond language to promote the meaning of existence. Taoists surpass the limits of language and further direct their thinking beyond words.

### 3. DIFFERENCE AND TAO: AN INTERPRETIVE STRATEGY FOR MEANING

The question arises of how to explain the meaning of language after the above deconstruction of the dichotomous model of "essence" and "metaphysics", which are central concepts in Derrida's and Taoist thoughts, respectively. The way in which meaning is made visible is the key to understanding both difference and Tao after the dismantlement of the fixed structure of the signifier/signified inherent in the language (whether phonetic or written). As claimed by Xi Mi, the two share three aspects in addressing the question of "what meaning is": the complementarity of opposing ideas, "creative" quality as well as "diffusion" and "transformation". First of all, one of the commonalities is the complementarity of opposing ideas. "Différance" is derived from the French *différer*, a word where the two meanings of difference (*diff*) and delay (*defer*) are expressed. Derrida explained it as follows: "For one thing, it (*différer*) shows difference, inequality or discrimination; for another, it expresses the mediation of delay, temporal interruption and postponement to "later" of what is currently denied as impossible and becomes possible". *Différance* is a word that contains a contradiction because it shows

difference while expressing the sequence of "sameness". Xi Mi claimed that "the extension of difference" preserves and emphasizes the double meaning of 'difference in sameness' and 'sameness in difference simultaneously'. In the meantime, Xi held the opinion that a similar form exists in the core Taoist concept of Dao. For instance, *On the Equality of Things* written by Zhuangzi writes: "whenever there is birth, there is death. Whenever there is death, there is life...Yes is also him, and he is also him. In addition, he is also right and wrong.... It describes a form of the Tao that is neither "something" nor "nothing", but makes it possible for them to be born together. An inherent contradiction is revealed by the "differences and similarities" in "difference" or the "existence and non-existence" in the "Tao". This is one of the ways in which Xi Mi referred to the interconnection of the two. Secondly, the common denominator is the "creative" quality emerging from these forms, which in turn insinuates the way in which "difference" and "Tao" understand the relationship between words and meanings. The connotation of "delay" in "difference" brings out the movement of "difference", and "difference" itself. The notion of "delay" is not a metaphysical concept. Thus, the relation of signifier/signified (or speech/meaning in the context of Chinese poetics) is a dynamic process of infinite delay and creation when viewed through the lens of "delay". Derrida elaborated that "(difference) does not exist in...a mere and uncorrected state of the self...It is a "non-perfect" rather than mere "founding", a primal with a structure of difference"(Derrida, 1973). In other words, "difference" offers exactly the possibility of creation in the case of a delay between the signifier (word) and the signified (meaning). This means that the signifier (word) keeps sliding towards the next signifier to infinitely approaching the signified (meaning), and in this gap between never reaching the referent (meaning) is where creation takes place. Hence, "difference" is the beginning of the process, and "delay" is the space of creation, where the word (the signifier) never reaches the infinite meaning (the signified) in its entirety. This infinite creation can also be found in the Taoist "Way". In the sight of Xi Mi, the Tao like *différance* is often seen as a kind of "founding" and a "mother". In the Tao, "the connotation of "nothing" resembles that of "difference", which is the birthplace of creation. Lao Tzu said, "everything under the sun is born of existence that is born of nothing, and The Tao gives birth to one, one to two, two to three, and three to all things". It can be seen that the "Tao" of "no name" creates all things, and "nothing" is not a concept opposed to "real being", but the one on which "being" is reliant. Rather, it is "nothing" on which "something" is based. From this perspective, the Taoist



understanding of the correlation between speech and meaning demonstrates the concept of "no words" as the "supreme word", which contains the richest "it is also a space for understanding and interpreting 'meaning'". This process of interpretation is endlessly dynamic. Finally, the third commonality is the "dispersal" of "yanji" and the "transformation" of the "Tao". The meaning becomes an open chain as "diffusion" has broken the fixed correspondence between energy and reference in language. Derrida pointed to its open and derivative diffusion: "Diffusion produces infinite semantic effects, which can be regarded simply as neither a mere and primitive being nor a being with a specific goal of advancement". As suggested by Xi Mi, the omnipresence of the "Tao" in Taoism is a manifestation of the way in which "transformation" manifests itself in all things, and also features "dispersal".

As written in *The North Tour*, "Dongguo Zi asked Zhuangzi, 'is the so-called Tao evil?'" Zhuangzi answered, "it is everywhere". Not only this, but Xi Mi further pointed out that the space for the mutual involvement and entanglement of the two opposing sides is opened up in "extended difference". This also means that "extended difference" itself implies such a space-This "duality" is always implicated and entangled in its relative state of "qi-i" (齐一). This implication was further developed in Zhuangzi. In *On the Equality of Things*, for example, "no things are not each other or right or wrong...They are born out of each other...".

Zhuangzi regarded opposites as cyclical rather than dichotomous, just as "today" is the "end" of yesterday and the "beginning" of tomorrow. "Beginning" and "end" reproduce each other on the basis of each other (Deng, 1998). In the eyes of Xi Mi, this mutual interaction is the "transformation" of the Tao or what Taoists call "qi-i" (齐一). This is similar to what Guo Xiang expressed in his commentary on Zhuangzi, "everything is self-existent". The two opposing conceptions are also unified if inverted and based on the "Tao" (difference). As Guo Xiang said in his commentary on Zhuangzi, "everything is self-existent, indicating no non-existence." If grasping the "unity" in this "difference", therefore, people can understand Zhuangzi's saying. That is, "heaven and earth are born together with me and everything is one with me." The Tao can be "manifested" (spread) in all things. From another point of view, everything can be "unified". This logic of "transformation" and "unity" is embodied in words/meanings as "no words" (i.e. "the Way").. It can be derived from an endless number of meanings, with more "words"

coming back to “the Way” in the end. Just as “différance” derives from a continuous creation cycle of meanings, all are based on “différance” that is the origin of all these meanings. In particular, Xi Mi maintained that this “Tao” and “différance” prior to any meaning are distinct from the perfect “self-existence” of metaphysics and irrelevant to the infinite derivation of meaning by the “one” of metaphysics.. They are not "one" and "many" in a metaphysical sense, but exist in the role of creative "many". Thus, the Word and the extension of difference can be understood as a kind of originaive dynamic rather than an a priori essence. Xi Mi's comparison revealed that both “différance” and “Tao” share a common connotative quality expressed in the understanding of the relationship between speech and meaning. "In the understanding of the word-meaning relationship, the two opposing sides complement each other and provide the impetus and space for “creativity”, as perceived by the Tao. Ultimately, meaning can be disseminated and manifested in an infinite cycle of creation. These three aspects of the process are all part of the meaning of "words without meaning" (The energy can only approach the meaning infinitely) and "meaning beyond words" (Meaning is constantly spread and derived).

#### 4. COMPARISON OF "DECONSTRUCTION": SIMILAR BUT DIFFERENT VIEWS OF LANGUAGE BY DERRIDA AND THE MADHYAMIKA

According to the argument of Chinese scholar Tsai Tsung-chi, the linguistic view of meso-philosophy could not yet generate sufficient attention compared with the eagerness of the academic community to compare Derrida with Taoist theory. Both of them have constructed respective theories through a critical idealist and materialist view of language, with language occupying a central place in their theoretical systems. Thus, research by Cai was useful in complementing the exploration of the category of “speech-meaning”, The purpose was to more fully understand how the relationship between speech and meaning draws theoretical resources from the complex historical context of Chinese thought. As stated by Cai, the similarity between the philosophy of the Madhyamika and the thought of Derrida is far more than that of Taoism. Besides, he listed the following five similarities between the two: Firstly, they play with words; secondly, they start by deconstructing the "ontology" of language; thirdly, they expose the phenomenon of words failing to reach

their meaning and the interdependence of words and meaning; fourthly, they propose the "fourth side" of philosophical thinking; fifthly, a deconstruction of deconstruction is carried out. A careful consideration of Cai's thesis revealed that the "five similarities" are only "similar" in terms of theoretical appearance, while a further comparison of their internal logic and theoretical strategies demonstrated their "similarities yet differences". Despite being also reflected in Cai's text, these differences are all broadly categorized as "similar" appearances. Examining the texts of the two theories more closely based on Cai's thesis was of use to provide a more objective reference between the two and enrich the interpretation of the connotation of "speech and meaning". Therefore, the five "similarities" of Cai's theory were further analyzed in the following section for the purpose of identifying the "differences" between the two. One of the differences lies in the method of destroying the conceptualization of ontological terms. Derrida utilized the juxtaposition of opposite concepts, whereas Madhyamika adopted the method of negative disyllabic words. Derrida used to bind opposite concepts together to reveal the tensions of language, such as "good/evil, intellectual/sensual, tall/short...". From a deconstructionist perspective, these contradictory diacritics inevitably result in a conflict between energetic meanings, justifying the role of the extended difference effect. The ontological meaning of opposing sides has been dissolved. Moreover, more meaningful interpretations have been derived, like the interpretation of "place" and "range" from "square" and "length". "Length" has given rise to the interpretation of "scale". In contrast to this, the approach of the Middle School appears to be more straightforward. For instance, Seng Zhao(僧肇) of Madhyamika took ready-made ontological terms, negated them to form new two-syllable words like "there" and "no" ontological in nature, and added negative words like "no" and "not". Negative words "no" and "not" form a strong negative meaning, i.e. not nothing or something. Through direct negation, Seng Zhao demonstrated that only temporary states rather than self-represented entities exist. Besides, the phenomenal world is only "not-nothing" instead of "not-being", and only "non-nothing" rather than "something". Likewise, calling "nothing", "non-something" and "non-being" avoids the conceptualization of "nothing". The way of the Madhyamika is to keep negating and elude the falling of any concept into ontological thinking by falling into solidity. Cai asserted that Seng Zhao's "non-nothing" is more effective in suppressing the conceptualization of words and has a stronger effect of de-essentialization than Derrida's deconstruction of words (Ye, 2019). Concerning the effect of

deconstructing the essentialization of language, the second difference is that Derrida's strategy presents a lengthy and temporally delayed discourse pattern, while the strategy of the Middle School displays a literal labyrinth pattern. From the connotation of the aforesaid "delay", it can be found that meaning arises from the difference between sign and signifier. A delay is always between the referent and the reference. Linguistic signs cannot point to an a priori ontology of meaning originating from an open chain of infinitely implicated signs. Thus, the deconstructed linguistic chain presents itself as a pattern of the derivation of meaning encompassing differences and infinite extensions. The Madhyamika, on the other hand, endeavors to build a labyrinth of words with limited negations, making it difficult to capture the "essential meaning" behind linguistic symbols. For example, Seng Zhao expressed that "therefore, there is nothing if there is not something. Nothing is nothing if there is no nothing. It is simply that what is not there is not really there and not nothing is not really nothing". In this short statement of 24 words, negative words "not", "there is" and "none" appear repeatedly and can be used as both nouns and verbs, which invariably adds to the difficulty of understanding meaning. Cai held the view that this semantically disjointed and grammatically intertwined sentence makes readers feel that his conceptual comprehension has been suppressed and he is thus caught in a labyrinth of words. In contrast to Derrida's lengthy discursive pattern, the Madhyamika of "barriers" with simple and limited symbols was built up by Centrists, with a view to increasing the difficulty of language in reaching so-called "essential meaning". As suggested by Cai, Seng Zhao was interested in indulging in dismantling ontological terminology and removing the inertia of conceptual thinking instead of playing Derrida-like word games. The deconstruction of words is simply a means of breaking through conceptualization and achieving spiritual sublimity, showing the essential difference between the word game and the labyrinth of words. The third difference is that paths of self-deconstruction are different. Self-deconstruction is a re-deconstruction made by Derrida and the Madhyamika to prevent the deconstruction theory they proposed from becoming a new kind of essentialism. Cai noticed that both Derrida and the Madhyamika used the number "four" to distinguish themselves from other philosophical thinking, followed by their deconstruction via the deconstruction of "four". The introduction of "four" is the first step in the deconstruction of both. Derrida discussed the different symbols of the number. In his opinion, numbers one and two stand for the dualistic categories of absolute and concrete existence and the resulting

contradictory opposition. Three is created to resolve dualistic opposition and “trinity” (Derrida, 1981b). His diffusion (or sowing) is the fourth side. He quoted a passage from Phillipe Sollers' *Numbers* to illustrate his understanding of the meaning of “four”: “Although it is only the fourth side of the triangle, this opening square unravels the triangle and the circle, whose triple rhythm (Oedipus, Trinity, dialectic) has always dominated metaphysics. It unravels them.....”(Derrida, 1981b). As can be seen, “four” is a break with closed fixity and opens up the space for the production of meaning, which is consistent with the connotation of the extension of difference. Madhyamika also made use of “four” to deny the one, two and three sides of theological ontology, which is expressed in “four broken sentences”. Long Shu, the founder of the school, used the phrase “not...not...” as the fourth of the three sides. As mentioned in *Madhyamika*, “if there is no constant now, how can there be impermanence? It is also constant and impermanent. If this is the case, there is no constant that can be obtained by wise inquiry. Who should have impermanence because of impermanence in impermanence? If there is neither, how can there be both constant and impermanent? If there is no constant, how can there be non-permanent and non-non-permanent? Due to the existence of constant and impermanent, there are non-permanent and non-impermanent. As indicated by Cai, Long Shu first proved that one (permanent), two (impermanent) and three sides (both permanent and impermanent) are not entities, and apoha(遮遣) one by one (Brewster et al., 2012) until the fourth side of “non-permanent and non-impermanent” (Dillon, 2016). Derrida's fourth side is a kind of opening up and breaking through, while the Madhyamika is to keep on “breaking” and moving forward. As such, this foreshadows the different paths of the two in the second step of deconstruction, which is the deconstruction of the self. When Derrida and Madhyamika reached by, the fourth side might form a new dichotomy with the first three sides, thereby turning self-deconstruction into an urgent problem. Derrida was alert to this danger when saying, “when the extended difference is marked by the silent ‘a’, its purpose is neither “conceptual” nor merely “discursive”. However, this does not keep it from having the effect of a concept...”(Harlan, 1989). For this reason, he sought to show a deconstruction of his own deconstructive terminology: “(difference) cannot be elevated to a unifying concept...Sowing makes no sense...Sowing and prolongation cannot be subsumed within a concept because their divisive power breaks the semantic horizon” (Harlan, 1989). In turn, Derrida engaged in a difficult and lengthy process of self-deconstruction where he completed the abandonment of the “position” through the

constant movement of mutual negation. He noted that "diffusion constantly dislocates itself in a series of alternating links of difference and delay" (Sharman, 2004), and deconstruction is therefore no absolute origin of meaning. Only "traces" characterize the process of deconstruction. In this regard, Derrida borrowed a mathematical formula to express his deconstruction:  $(1+2+3+4)^2$  times (Derrida, 1981a). This illustrates a non-linear and never-ending deconstruction, indicating no ultimate absolute meaning and thus avoiding the danger of his own deconstructive terminology falling into essentialist thinking. Similarly, the Madhyamika also sought to dissolve the fourth side in their self-deconstruction, whose strategy for breaking "four broken sentences" differs from the path of Derrida. Also known as the Two Noble Truths, the two meanings of "there" and "no" are the starting point of Centrists' deconstruction (Meelberg, 2009), which proceeds along the alternating negation of the Two Noble Truths. "Four broken sentences" mentioned above have already reached the realm of the Two Noble Truths. Then, Farang overshadowed them, pushing them to the Three Noble Truths. Jizang overshadowed them again, pushing them to the Four Noble Truths (Lu, 2023). The whole process is based on the previous realm, which is then broken down and pushed to the next level. Jizo maintained that this deconstruction can be repeated and advanced until its complete freedom from attachment to the concept. Cai claimed that this process is linear "1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8" (Cui, 2013) when expressed as a numerical formula, which symbolizes a fixed direction and a clear goal in the movement of deconstruction in contrast to Derrida's "vain dispersion". The difference between the two is evident here. Derrida's non-linear and squared formulas represent a vast derivation of meaning as indefinite as "sowing". However, the linear progression of the Madhyamika breaks through in layers, beware of falling into conceptual thinking at each step and ultimately arriving at a situation where no language or conceptual paranoia exists. The fourth difference lies in the result of deconstruction. Cai pointed out that Derrida and Centrists, in a continuous process of deconstruction, eventually reached the "end" of philosophy where all conceptual and essentialist thinking is dissolved. However, the two are significantly different in their ultimate directions. Derrida's "philosophical end" is incarnated in an endless play on words, where meaning falls into an indeterminate void. He himself realized the result: "to enter into the game of prolonged difference...is to run the risk of empty words without meaning" (Harlan, 1989). As far as Cai was concerned, Derrida took this risk and presents in his work *Glas* a practice of deconstruction that drones on, chains concepts

in endless chains of difference and deliberately piles up "nonsense" with words. In this way to deconstructs the attributes of perfect self-existence imposed on language. When leaving behind and abandoning ontology, however, he led himself into the prison of language and the abyss of nihilism (Dillon, 2016). Nevertheless, the deconstruction of Madhyamika always has a clear goal that is not to be understood conceptually but to leap into the religious realm of enlightenment (Dillon, 2016). It is a "clear and directed" path from twofold to multiple, which thus does not move aimlessly through traces of wordplay or into ultimate nothingness. "Emptiness" that it finally reaches is beyond linguistic and conceptual thinking. However, it is not a Derridean empty word without meaning, but a religiously salvific "oblivion". As Yip put it, "in general, four doors lead to the breaking down of the manifestation...of the reality of all dharmas, where words die and considerations cease. The three doors of obliteration are reduced to one phase" (Yip, 2023). Cai's analysis showed that the deconstruction of Madhyamika lies in the complete dissolution of language and concepts. When "ending" (broken or closed), the philosophical discourse enters the realm of nirvana (the obliteration of the upper three and the return to the one). This ending is one of faith rather than frustration. This view of language was later exploited by Zen Buddhism of the Song Dynasty which sought the ultimate "epiphany" and abandoned language, and also absorbed by the aesthetic orientation of poetics at that time. The above four aspects show some of the differences in the paths and directions of deconstruction between Derrida and Centrists. Both of them undertook a painstaking search to show that "language cannot express meaning to the fullest". Through the deconstruction of ontological and conceptual thinking, they went in different directions as if their deconstructive logic and strategies led to very different outcomes from the same starting point. The value of language differs between the two systems as well. Derrida's extended difference throws meaning into the abyss of nothingness but finds it difficult to escape the "long" chain of language. The Madhyamika see language as a means to an end and abandon it when it reaches its highest meaning.

## 5. SUMMARY: THREE UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE ULTIMATE "MEANING"

The three linguistic perspectives were used for sorting out the "deconstruction of words and meanings" of Derrida, Taoism and the Middle School. It shows that they took different paths to deconstruct the

paradox of words and meanings. In the end, the reason lies in the different understandings of "meaning" represented by "speech". For Derrida, it is the "existence" of nothingness and the disintegration of everything that can be characterized, thereby demonstrating no real "meaning" after all. For Taoism, it is the "way" of the unity of all things, and the ultimate meaning remains recognized. For the Middle School, it is the "emptiness" without falling to one side, which arises from the conditions of infinite change. Derrida disagreed with the essential sense of "being", arguing that "being" arises in the interstices of the linguistic chain where the signifier and signified slide in and out of each other. On this account, signifier to signified, forming an infinitely prolonged chain of language, and the meaning of "being" is diffused. The "dispersal" of deconstructionists is analogous to the "Tao" of Taoists in that it is transformed into all things. Nonetheless, the use of diffusion by Derrida to show the multiplication and dispersal of meaning results in the emptiness of meaning and the endless piling up of language. In this regard, Weilian Yeh argued that the deconstruction of Derrida faces "a pile of cultural rubble, which he fails to deconstruct to provide a spiritual orientation for the integration of all things"(Chen & Ji, 2023). The ultimate essence is beingless in Derrida's theory, and the so-called "meaning" represented by language is never the meaning itself. Taoism perceives the regulation of language as cutting the integrity of things, language as a temporary tool for pursuing the Tao and its use as a point of reference, leading to the understanding of the Tao. "It goes without saying that Taoism still recognizes the nature of the Tao as the ontology of the universe." That said, Taoism does not give an answer to the definition of the Tao, but only proposes that the Tao is manifested in all things. Besides, all things are unified with the nature of the Tao. To retain its perfection, the Tao is the highest and the most important thing." In order to preserve the fullness of the Tao, the highest ideal is "speechlessness", which in turn creates a kind of linguistic evasion. Having shown the inability of words to fully express meaning, the Madhyamika proposes to avoid falling into nothingness by putting forward a state of "words end, thoughts cease". This is different from Taoism's "no words" holding that everything exists temporarily on the basis of karmic harmony (The existence of karmic birth and the non-existence of karmic death are not real (Wasserstrom, 2008)). Therefore, it has to be rejected one by one by means of "not (not)...not (not)..." until it reaches the religious meaning of Nirvana (enlightenment without birth or death), namely "emptiness". This approach allows one to acknowledge the reality of meaning while being flexible enough to deconstruct it at any time. To put it another way,



one can negate conceptual thinking at any time until its abandonment once he falls into it. The realm of "emptiness" in Zhong Guan is "a rescue from the 'rootless' dilemma of postmodern theory" to a certain extent (Wang, 2021). The relationship between language and meaning explored by the aforementioned scholars provides an interpretive space for understanding the "discrimination of meaning and speech" in traditional Chinese poetics. By re-examining local theories through the lens of the other, the question of meaning and speech takes on a new dimension and discrimination. Thus, traditional poetic propositions are given the space to have a dialogue with modern theories.

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