Background to Derrida

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Linguistic Structural Realism

- The structures of language are similar to structures of reality
- Aristotle had an early theory of this kind
- The units of sentences are subject and predicate
- These may be particular or general
- Objects in the world are classified accordingly

Linguistic Structuralism

- General theory of the structure of language
- Advanced by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)
- All languages have two kinds of components
- Linguistic rules provide structure
- Linguistic units (words) are interchangeable within the structure

Linguistic Structural Anti-Realism

- Rejection of the thesis that structures of language are similar to structures of reality
- Weak version: any assertion of similarity must be made within the confines of language
- Strong version: structures of language are arbitrary creations of human thought

Structure and Meaning

- The unit of language is the sign
- The sign is resolved into a signifier and a signified
- Meaning, or signification, is a relation between the signifier and signified
- Saussure held that signification is conventional and arbitrary
- A condition for meaning is difference: that one signifier is not any of the other signifiers
- A generalization is that the structural basis of meaning is difference

Linguistic Referential Realism

- Linguistic units have meaning by referring to non-linguistic objects
- Plato and Aristotle: general terms refer to forms
- General terms refer to particular objects insofar as those objects are related to the forms
- Descartes and Locke: all words refer directly to "ideas in the mind"
- Ideas then refer to non-ideal objects, so that words refer to them indirectly

Linguistic Referential Anti-Realism

- Rejection of the thesis that linguistic units have meaning by referring to non-linguistic objects
- Weak version (Wittgenstein): words have meaning through patterns of linguistic practice
- Practices are nonetheless constrained by non-linguistic reality
- Strong version: words have meaning only by referring to other words
- Do any constraints remain if this is so?