Chapter 4

Derrida’s Word Game and Nagarjuna’s Word Maze: Lexical-Syntactical Deconstruction

In the search for finding the forefather of Derrida in the person of Nagarjuna, chapter two of this dissertation explored the parallels between the two thinkers in the field of Negative dialectics and established similarities found in both the thinkers and the next chapter analysed two critical concepts of the thinkers *différance* and *Sunyata* respectively and found sparkling similarities, following the footsteps of earlier chapters, the present chapter focuses its’ attention to the hitherto unexplored parallels in Derridean and *Madhyamika* deconstructive use of language.

After dwelling in detail the place of language in Buddhism and the philosophy behind it, this chapter would examine how Derrida and Nagarjuna perform lexical-syntactical deconstructions in their philosophical writings. Then, it would consider how they use their lexical-syntactical deconstructions to demonstrate the impossibility of claiming ontological-theological essence in language, and how they proceed to double-negate onto theologies in their respective traditions. This chapter would also observe how Derrida and Nagarjuna theorise about their double negation in similar terms of neither/nor but pursue their deconstructive enterprises along different paths. Before going into the comparison, analysis of a few rudimentary concepts regarding language held by these two thinkers is highly necessary for deep understanding.
Language of Buddhist Scriptures

Language was an essential part of Buddhism as Buddha supported the view that common dialect should be used to spread Buddhism. Language had always seized prime position during Gautama Buddha’s times, on which He was believed to have laid special stress. One of the most predominant features of Buddhism is that it propagates the most profound religious discourses in layman’s language. The medium in which Buddha preached was the common man’s language, Pali. Buddha wished that his followers know and realise the scriptures properly, so that they too can impart and transmit the knowledge of the holy texts with precision.

Buddha also emphasised the need to be fluent with languages. According to him, it was only a wise man and good orator who possessed the capability to become a teacher. Language thus played an important role in extending the principles of Buddhism to people from all walks of life. In later eras, precisely after Buddha’s passing away into mahaparinirvana, when Buddhist schools started to divide amongst themselves, the Pali Canon which came into existence had particularly redefined language in Buddhist scriptures.

Pali is the name given to the language of the scriptures (Pali canon) of Theravada Buddhism. Theravada tradition avows that the language of the canon is Magadhi, the language spoken by Gautama Buddha. The term Pali originally pertained to a canonical text or passage. The Pali language of the Theravadin canon is a version of a dialect of
Middle Indo-Aryan, produced by an amalgamation of the dialects in which the teachings of Buddha were orally recorded and transmitted.

The oral transmission of Pali Canon continued for several centuries after the death of Buddha, even after the texts were first preserved in writing. No single script was ever formulated for the language of the canon; scribblers used the scripts of their native languages to transcribe the texts. As a result, language of Buddhist scriptures perhaps turned into a convoluted one, owing to additions of later populace.

Although monasteries in South India are known to have been significant centres of Buddhist learning in the early part of this millennium, no manuscripts from anywhere in India except Nepal have outlasted. Almost all the manuscripts available to scholars can be dated back to the 18th or 19th centuries C.E. The pattern of recitation and substantiation of texts by councils of monks has remained well into the 20th century.

In the panoptic context of language of Buddhist scriptures, Gautama Buddha was always against the view that Sanskrit is superior to all other languages. As a result, all the ancient Buddhist manuscripts were scripted in Pali. Though Buddha himself preached in Pali, scholars and monks were encouraged to disseminate the message in regional languages. Pali is considered to be the principal medium of language for Buddhists. The scriptures of early Buddhist texts as well as those of Theravada Buddhism have been penned down in Pali. But when it came to preaching the Buddhist marga (way of life),
colloquial languages invariably came to usage. He was a staunch supporter of regional
dialects. Language thus held a special place in Buddhism. Buddha’s policy also made his
discipline popular with the common man who hardly understood Sanskrit. Language was
also instrumental in attaining nirvana in Buddhism, further heightened and enlightened
by language in Buddhist scriptures.

Most philosophical schools have their own distinct doctrines regarding the role of
language in understanding the world and in shaping the content of human minds.
Language is not a mental medium, which represents an independent pre-existing external
reality but is constitutive of meanings and values, which play a dynamic role in our
apprehension of reality. In his scholarly article entitled, The Philosophy of Language: An
Extended Epistemology, Amitabha Das Gupta clearly explains this point in the following
words. He says that “The method of ordinary language philosophy involves taking a
certain view of language and meaning” (65) In the following passages the researcher
proceeds to analyse in brief Derrida’s philosophy of language and then sets out on a
comparative study with Buddhist and Nagarjuna’s standpoint on language.

Derrida’s Philosophy of Language

Jacques Derrida’s treatment of the philosophy of language tries to say that
meaning is never fixed in a way that allows us to effectively determine it. It also says that
intentionality does not play quite the same role as is traditionally conceived in the
philosophy of language; that is, ones intention does not determine the meaning of what
one is saying. Instead, the meaning of the words one uses determines one’s intention when one speaks. This does not mean that one does not mean what one is saying, or that one cannot have intentions in communicating. Because language is a social structure that developed long before and exists prior to one’s use of it as individuals, one has to learn to use it and tap into its web of meanings in order to communicate with others. Another area of interest for Derrida is the role of writing in language and communication. What Derrida does with language in his Deconstructive reading is as follows:

A ‘deconstructive’ reading of a text tries to bring out the logic of the text’s language as opposed to the logic of the author’s claims and intentions, and is governed by the theory (a) that concepts tend to involve their opposites, and (b) that language is a labyrinth from which there is no escape. There being no ‘real world’ that serves as its boundary or external point of reference. (Eliot, 189)

Derrida studies all of these things, focusing on the importance of the written versus the importance of the spoken. At the outset, he questions the very nature of communication itself before working his way into the problems he sees with traditional Anglo-American philosophy of language. Derrida also tries to make a contrast between two views of language. On the view that Derrida believes correct, the linguistic sign, whether spoken or written, acquires its meaning, its significance, from conventions.

Meaning is a matter of nomos or institution rather than physis or nature. Since meaning is a matter of convention rather than nature, the sign on this view is arbitrary.
And in this respect, there is no distinction between the linguistic or phonic sign and the written or graphic sign. The other view of language denies that all significance is a matter of nomos. There are, rather, at least some signs the signification of which is natural. This view of language is one that Derrida, quite correctly, locates in Plato.

**Buddhist Philosophy of Language and Nagarjuna’s Standpoint**

Buddhism has an instrumental approach to its scripture and language. The doctrine has no value other than its effectiveness for achieving inner transformation. Buddhist theory of language is related to the doctrine of two truths: Samvṛti (conventional truth), Satya and Paramartha Satya (ultimate truth). Language and its conventions with the world of relativity can never lead us directly to absolute truth. The conventional signs of the language refer not to external phenomena but only to themselves. The aphoha doctrine determines memory of words by exclusion or negation. With this negative dialect, the deceptive nature of language can be exposed.

Debates concerning philosophical problems on language occupy a large part of Nagarjuna’s theoretical reflection. According to Buddhist phenomenologies (abhidharma, yogācāra), language is not a dharma (a constitutive entity of reality) in itself but a combination of three different dharmas: phonemes, words, and sentences. These three linguistic dharmas have a peculiar nature in that they are different from material entities, from mind—considered by Buddhism as pure consciousness—and from mental factors, which are affective and intentional states.
Every concrete activity of thought is a manipulation of syllables or phonemes into words or sentences, the only structures of ordinary language endowed with meaning. For this reason, linguistic dharmas belong to a group of incorporeal entities, neither material nor mental. Buddhist thought conceives of language as the main tool for building up and articulating phenomenal reality. The fourth ring in the chain of conditioned causation (pratītya samutpāda), known as names - forms (nāma rūpa), represents the inextricable interdependence of cognitive processes and external reality, phenomena and discriminating mind, names and things of the ordinary world of suffering.

Linguistic descriptions of the world have no absolute truth value; language is an instrument of fallacious knowledge, for it creates reality as perceived and constructed in ordinary states of consciousness through categorization and conceptualization of perceptual data and their semantic articulation.

In the Buddhist epistemology language has the function of articulating a world of illusion through the power of semiotic seeds. Non-enlightened people consider their own ordinary image of the world to be true and corresponding to reality since they attribute to the objects characteristics peculiar to linguistic expressions (autonomy, immutability, homogeneity). Such confusion of ontology with epistemology, of reality with its linguistic descriptions and mental images is called avidyā (ignorance) in Buddhism. Epistemologic ignorance is the first cause of existential suffering. Therefore, there is an absolute gap separating language from true reality.
The tradition of the great Indian philosopher Nagarjuna in particular developed systematically this philosophical position. According to a traditional doctrine quoted in some Buddhist texts, ordinary language is made up by words that are related to superficial aspects of phenomena; uttered in dreams; conditioned by fallacious attachment to wrong ideas; and forever conditioned by the seeds of suffering.

Buddhist linguistic speculation thus had to face the question of the status of the word of the Buddha. Did the Buddha contribute to the suffering and delusion of sentient beings by speaking words devoid of truth? Doctrinal matters of pedagogy, epistemology, and soteriology were at stake here that also affected speculations on the nature of the Buddha and the status of his historical manifestations. Obviously, it was not possible to deny completely the value of the word of the Buddha, because this would have meant the self-destruction of Buddhism. Thus, a distinction was made between the wisdom of the Buddha and the signs that convey it, and the word of the Buddha was given a peculiar status.

Buddhist Texts such as the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, and the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* sanction in an inevitably paradoxical way the ineffability of the wisdom of the Buddha in human ordinary language. This sanction of ineffibility can be interpreted in two ways, both very interesting for the semiotician: the Buddha does not speak and conveys his experience in a nonlinguistic way because ultimate communication through language is not possible.
Buddha uses a peculiar language consisting in special systems of signs, which it is possible to know and understand. These opposite positions both presuppose a theory of communication and a semiotics of initiatory transmission of meaning. In spite of doctrinal differences, all Buddhist traditions agree upon the basic assumption that the Buddha explained many different doctrines in consideration of the circumstances, contexts, and the competence and salvational needs of the audience.

The first sanction of ineffability (communication through language is impossible) was developed by the tradition ascending back to Nagarjuna and was aimed at the attainment of emptiness through an incessant deconstruction of meaning. The second option (the Buddha speaks a different, higher form of language) could yield in turn two different interpretations:

1. The language of the Buddha is a mere upāya (skillful means), an expedient devoid of absolute value but necessary in order to help humans attain a truth transcending every language (this is the doctrinal position of most Buddhist schools);
2. Absolute truth can be communicated, and the Buddha speaks peculiar words of a non-ordinary language in order to lead sentient beings to salvation.

This is the basic assumption of the teachings of esoteric or tantric Buddhism. In both cases, a systematic manipulation of linguistic signs was put into practice in order to bring language beyond its limits and force it to speak the absolute. The Indian religious experience attributes major importance to a set of words called mantra, used in meditation and in rituals.
This peculiar kind of words has been exploited also in *Mahayana* Buddhism as tools for meditation or as amulets. The profoundest teachings of the Buddha were thought to have been transmitted by this kind of “twilight language” or “intentional language” (*samādhyābhasā*), comprehensible only to those endowed with superior faculties. In any case, theoretical and ritual problematics of *mantras* were not developed clearly by *Mahayana* Buddhism, which tends on the contrary to present language as a provisional means (*upāya*); the absolute principle of *tathatā* (“thusness”; absolute reality) remains beyond language and signification.

The word of the Buddha was considered to be a reality in itself, which cannot be reduced to mere expression of an individual thought: It was the objective expression, the double of reality as experienced after enlightenment. However, for the attainment of the goals of esoteric Buddhism (becoming Buddha in this very body and obtaining worldly benefits it is not enough to simply postulate the deep identity of language and reality: such identity must be evident from the structure of language itself. This is the only way for *Tantric* symbolic practices to have efficacious and instantaneous results.

According to esoteric Buddhist teachings, language is true because once its ordinary laws have been deconstructed, it becomes iconic and thus—for a fundamental postulate of esoteric logic—identical to what it speaks of. Theoretical identity is confirmed by processes of remotivation that concern not just the sounds of language but also writing and the forms of sentences and texts. This leads us to the discussion of
semiotics which is a branch of linguistic study that specialises in the study of signs and forms of language.

Derrida came to be known and became highly influential with his seminal essay on *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* which was later formed part of his book *Writing and Difference*, thus from his early period he was particularly interested in the semiotics, before an analysis of Derridean semiotics, a study about Buddhist semiotics follows.

**Buddhist Semiotics**

A systematic study of Buddhist semiotics has yet to be undertaken. Until now, only a few scholars have tackled aspects of Buddhist cultures with a semiotic eye. There are multifarious Buddhist semiotic ideas and practices, for they developed in a wide variety of cultural, historical, and social contexts. Buddhism established two basically different kinds of semiotics: One is related to what could be called “ordinary” semiosis; the other describes the interactions with reality in altered (ritual and meditative) states of consciousness. Only the most basic elements of Buddhist semiotics, common to a large part of the Buddhist universe of discourse, will be outlined here.

One of the most striking characteristics of the Buddhist canon is its heterogeneity; even the doctrines traditionally attributed to the teaching of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni are often in overt contradiction with one another. The Buddhists gave such
doctrinal heterogeneity a pragmatic and communicational meaning. One of the core notions of Buddhism, in fact, is that the Buddha taught many different doctrines according to the faculties and possibilities of comprehension of his audience. This is in accordance with Indian cosmology and psychology, which recognize various levels of existence and stages in the development of consciousness: to each stage correspond a certain truth and a certain set of doctrines. Therefore, Buddhist exegesis presents interesting semiotic features, such as different levels of truth and a semiotics of textual cooperation.

Numberless Buddhas are believed to be preaching the Law at the same time to multitudes of beings living in countless world systems that make up the Buddhist cosmos; each Buddha is teaching the Dharma using a particular language, and verbal language is just the most unsophisticated. The semiotician is confronted here with two problems: the semiotic status of these languages and the unifying principle of all cosmic discourses.

In *Mahayana* Buddhism, the Buddha is no longer simply a historical person, the teacher, or the enlightened one; he is transformed into a manifestation of the universal principle of enlightenment, a silent, eternal, numinous presence, called *Dharmakāya* (the body of the dharma). This transformation made the universal Buddha the ultimate subject of all discourses, the universal principle of articulation of discursivity. This is shown in
many texts where the Buddha says nothing until the epilogue but silently empowers the characters in the text to talk and explain difficult doctrines.

Buddhism posits the existence of two radically different cognitive modalities corresponding to two different semiotic models: one is ordinary, discriminative, and basically fallacious, the other is contemplative, integrating, and undifferentiated. Ordinary knowledge (jñāna) is considered fallacious because it confuses a presumed ontological reality of the universe with the ordinary psychomental phenomena and processes (modalities and functions of the mind) that create that reality.

On the contrary, true and absolute knowledge, described in many different ways by Buddhist schools, is called prajñā or bodhi. It is the product of the practice of yoga, resulting in altered (nonordinary) states of body, mind, and language. Usually translated as enlightenment, true knowledge has often been ascribed by Western scholars to the various phenomena of irrationality and mysticism and its theoretical semiotic relevance has been overlooked.

Such an absolute knowledge implies radical transformation of the human cognitive apparatus. ālaya – vijñāna is transformed through the practice of yoga from an ideative device, source of illusion and suffering, into pure mind, a clear mirror reflecting everything without formulating interpretations or judgments. The more superficial consciousness apparatus becomes the agent of good and pure actions.
In this way, ordinary consciousness can turn into the instrument for the attainment of Buddhahood and liberation from suffering. Once the human cognitive apparatus has been transformed into the supreme mirror like wisdom, semiosis (as the activity of creation, interpretation, and transmission of signs) is brought to an end by the attainment of emptiness. What remains is only the reiteration of cosmic processes and the reflection of the absolute and undifferentiated realm of essence performed through yoga.

Buddhist texts describe this condition that defies human possibilities of comprehension through the metaphor of Indra’s Net: each pearl reflects all the other pearls without interpreting or modifying them. The Buddhist universe in its absolute modality is made of reflections reflecting reflections in a cosmic interplay of pure light.

**Buddhism in Semiotics**

Since the late 1970s, Buddhist concepts and metaphors have been discussed more and more frequently in semiotic discourses. It is less a systematic phenomenon than a transversal attitude fragmented across scattered texts and in the usages of many authors within the general ambit of the new cognitive sciences (constructivism, cognitivism, complexity, artificial intelligence), in which traditional boundaries between “hard” and human sciences, between physics, biology, psychology, and semiotic disciplines, are blurred. Although fragmentary and in many respects still superficial (and fashionable), the introduction of Buddhist concepts in semiotic discourses is a significant symptom of an epistemological crisis in scientific research.
The “new sciences,” having distanced themselves from the tradition of modern science and its dualistic postulates, need new models of reality and new descriptions of the world to accommodate their critical approaches. A significant number of thinkers are resorting more or less explicitly to Buddhism in their searches for new metaphors and concepts. Roland Barthes was perhaps the first to introduce into semiotics Buddhist concepts such as *kū* (emptiness) and *satori* (enlightenment).

Although very simplified, these concepts borrowed from Zen Buddhism entered Barthes’s own personal semiotic discourse aimed at bringing language to a stop, in a quest for what he called the zero degree of semiotics. Barthes’s peculiar interpretation of the “empire of signs” had a significant impact in Japan. In spite of the shortcomings of his interpretation of Zen, Barthes contributed to the semiotic problematization of concepts such as emptiness and enlightenment, usually considered only from a religious point of view.

**Derrida’s Semiotics**

Jacques Derrida’s theory of the sign or semiotics fits into the poststructuralist movement, which runs counter to Saussurean structuralism (the legacy of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure). Maintaining that the signifier (the form of a sign) refers directly to the signified (the content of a sign), structuralist theory has passed down a whole current of logocentric (speech-centred) thought that originated in the time of Plato. With writing as his basis (the written sign), Derrida has taken on the task of disrupting the
entire stream of metaphysical thought predicated on oppositions. He has elaborated a
theory of deconstruction (of discourse, and therefore of the world) that challenges the
idea of a frozen structure and advances the notion that there is no structure or centre, no
univocal meaning. The notion of a direct relationship between signifier and signified is
no longer tenable, and instead we have infinite shifts in meaning relayed from one
signifier to another.

The term “poststructuralism” refers to a critical perspective that emerged during
the seventies which has dethroned structuralism as the dominant trend in language and
textual theory. Deconstructionist criticism subscribes to the poststructuralist vision of
language, wherein the signifier (the form of a sign) does not refer to a definite signified
(the content of a sign), but produces other signifiers instead. Derrida in his book *Writing
and Difference* takes issue with the centre inherent in the “structurality of structure”.

Turning to Claude Lévi-Strauss as a representative of structuralist theory, Derrida
uses the prohibition of incest and the oppositions nature/culture and universal/prescriptive
to show that this structure can no longer withstand scrutiny: “The incest prohibition is
universal; in this sense one could call it natural. But it is also a prohibition, a system of
norms and interdicts; in this sense one could call it cultural” (283). Derrida thus rejects all
of metaphysical history with its hierarchies and dichotomies that have survived to this
day, the foundation upon which all of *logic* (*logos*, which means language) was laid.
Derrida has rejected structuralism, and as a result, the Saussurean schema (the signifier/signified relationship) has been rethought.

**Treatment of language by Derrida and Nagarjuna**

As we have been exploring in the earlier chapters of this dissertation, Buddhism has close association with the practices of deconstruction. Some scholars have pointed to methodological affinities between the treatments of language by Jacques Derrida and Nagarjuna. Robert Magliola has shown how the study of Buddhist deconstructionist doctrines can be useful also for the creation of a postmodern Christian theology.

The penetration of Buddhism into semiotics, epistemology, and ethics is by no means a surprise. Since the 1970s, Buddhism has been taking root in Western countries and is flourishing as an autonomous tradition. This is perhaps similar to what happened many centuries ago in China and in the other countries of East and Southeast Asia, when many forms of Buddhism spread and started to interact with those cultures, producing new and richer ideas and practices.

**Derrida’s view of language in contrast with Nagarjuna**

In contrast with above seen Buddhist and Nagarjuna’s view on language, Derrida’s handling of language has often been compared to a kind of hand trick magic. In his writings, Derrida plays with words the way a magician plays with his objects. He takes a special delight in juggling opposite meanings within a word and creating a dizzying
illusion of presence and absence, affirmation and denial. To figure out the secrets of his word game, one needs to look at the ways he plays meanings off against each other at the typographic, morphological, orthographic, semantic, etymological, and syntactic levels.

Derrida’s typographic deconstruction is the most eye-catching of all his word games. In one of his books entitled Dissemination he writes the following words as subheadings for the fifth section in part I ‘writing,’ ‘encasing,’ and ‘screening.’ Instead of writing in the ordinary way he write it as follows, “wriTing,” “encAsing,” and “screeNing,” (75) by doing so he immediately puts their conceptual meanings under erasure. With these deliberately misplaced capitalizations, Derrida not only delays our recognition of these words, but also injects doubt into one’s mind as to whether these words are meant to mean what they ordinarily mean. As one cannot figure out what “Ting,” “Asing,” and “Ning” stand for, one is left to assume that these embedded nonsensible signs function like an overstrike (“writing,” “encasing,” and “screening”) making these words signify simultaneously what they do and do not mean under normal circumstances.

Derrida’s morphological deconstruction is less visually conspicuous but more thought-provoking. At the mention of morphological deconstruction, one immediately thinks of the very name by which Derrida prefers to let his philosophy be known. The word deconstruct results from a combination of two opposing morphemes: ‘de’ (to undo, to destroy) and ‘construct’ (to do, to build). Violently yoked together, these two opposing
morphemes come under a more dramatic kind of erasure than typographical
deconstruction. One’s response to this word, when first heard, is a dramatic sense of
tension arising from a bizarre coexistence of destructive and constructive forces, a sense
hitherto un-conceptualised by any existing words.

To bring one’s attention to the tension of opposite meanings latent in morphology,
Derrida does not merely cast opposite morphemes into a new word like ‘deconstruct.’
More often, he hyphenates or brackets conflictual morphemes of an existing word, and
thereby compels one to perceive the word not as a lifeless concept but as a vortex of
conflicting meanings. For instance, in his Dissemination, he hyphenates the two
morphemes of the word ‘preface,’ and discusses conflicts between ‘pre’ and ‘face’ in
respect of temporal sequence. Then, he associates ‘pre-face’ with its pseudo synonym
‘pre-text’ and conceives of a conflict between a substitution and an original implicated in
the two morphemes of ‘pre-face.’

Derrida’s orthographic deconstruction is, of course, best represented by his well-
known coinage of différance. Before discussing the significance of différance one needs
to consider Derrida’s semantic deconstruction. To put words under rupture Derrida
exploits the semantic discrepancies as much as he manipulates morphological contrariety.
If a word contains discrepant meanings within itself, he seeks to bring them into our
consciousness. By so doing, he hopes to put the readers on guard against letting the word
be over determined at the expense of its double entendre.
To accentuate a word’s semantic contrariness, Derrida often goes beyond its common usage and digs into its rich semantic sediments within writings of disparate types and different times. It is often a formidable task to track down such a semantic investigation because it threads through a great many texts without following a predetermined route. A case in point is his semantic investigation of the Greek word *pharmakon* in his lengthy essay *Plate's Pharmacy*, in *Dissemination*.

Derrida starts with the undecidability of the word between ‘remedy’ and ‘drug,’ ‘cure’ and ‘poison.’ Then, by way of an anagrammatical twist, he goes into the mythical figure ‘*Pharmaricja*’ and the word ‘*pharmakeos*’ (sorcerer, magician). In the course of this semantic investigation, he pursues the manifold meanings of pharmakon through such 'other' domains as medicine, painting, politics, farming, law, sexuality, festivity, and family relations. The result is a startling revelation of *pharmakon*’s double entendre pertaining to a wide range of philosophical issues such as speech and writing, literal and figurative meanings, and paternity and language.

Such a rigorous semantic deconstruction seems already to have crossed the boundary of semantics into the field of etymology. To expose the ‘in-tension’ of conflictual forces within a word, Derrida often avails himself of etymological deconstruction. He traces a word to its etymological roots of opposite import and thus invalidates the monolithic conceptualization of the word in question. For instance, in his book *Writing and Difference*, Derrida traces his neologism *archie* on the one hand to the
Greek *arche*, meaning foundation, order, and principles (as reserved in words like architecture and hierarchy), and on the other to the Greek *aporia*, meaning excess resistant to order or logic. Notably, this etymological deconstruction attests to the co-arising of order and disorder, passion and logic. Like many other words of similar ‘intension,’ *archia* becomes a prized deconstructive term for Derrida.

Derrida’s syntactical deconstructions are far less frequent and far less varied than his lexical deconstructions. They are usually intended to enhance the effects of lexical deconstructions. For instance, to drive home the significance of his orthographic deconstruction, Derrida deliberately deconstructs the syntax of his concluding statement in his seminal essay in his book *Margins of Philosophy*, “Difference”: Such is the question: the alliance of speech and being in the unique word, in the finally proper name. And such is the question inscribed in the simulated affirmation of *différance* it bears on each member of this sentence: Being/speaks always and everywhere/throughout/language.

When Derrida cuts his concluding statement into pieces, Derrida virtually destroys its syntax and what is inherent in it -- a hierarchical order of subject-predicate-object. As a result, the lexical elements get freed from the binding syntax and become equal, free-floating components. These lexical elements may easily exchange positions and bring forth meanings contradictory to that of the original syntax. In so far as this mangled syntax results in such heterogeneous, opposite meanings, it may very well be assumed to
reaffirm the significance of *différance*: an exposure of the pluralistic, contradictory import within any concept and a proof of the impossibility of self-presence within language.

Indeed, this deconstructed sentence deals with none other than the issue of language and Being. Just as ‘difference’ shows Being (signified) always to be deferred in time and differentiated in space by language (signifier), this deconstructed syntax enacts a play of signifier and signified caused by that ineluctable gap in space and time.

Indeed, the syntactical interchangeability of ‘Being/speaks/language/...’ and ‘language/speaks/ Being...’ aptly highlights Derrida’s deconstructive conception of Being. When he casts Being into this deconstructed syntax, he intends to demonstrate that Being is not a self-present, transcendental signified lodged in the traditional *copula* syntax of an ontotheological discourse.

For Derrida, Being is nothing more than a signifier that ‘speaks/language’ -- speaking and re-speaking, writing and rewriting itself perpetually and indeterminately like *différance*. Moreover, the syntactical interchangeability of ‘Being/speaks/language/...’ and ‘language/speaks/Being...’ emblemizes the infinite circularity in the movement of Being as a sign. This kind of concept-splitting immediately reminds us of Derrida’s yoking of opposite concepts: “good/evil, intelligible/sensible, high/low, life/death.” (*Dissemination*, 25-26)
Derrida’s Word Game and Nagarjuna’s Word Maze

As compared with Derrida’s practice, Nagarjuna’s seems to produce a greater disorienting effect because the split parts collide with one another head-on and result in a total cancellation. His “not nonsexist” would probably inhibit one’s capacity to conceptualize more effectively than Derrida’s lexical deconstructions. However, while Nagarjuna more successfully taxes our conceptuality in his concept-splitting, he does not utilize varied means of lexical deconstruction as does Derrida.

Derrida’s word game and Nagarjuna’s word maze exploit the co-dependence of opposite elements at different levels of language. Through such lexical-syntactical deconstructions, Derrida and Nagarjuna aim to demonstrate that language is not a matter of a signifier presencing a signified as a self-identity, but an interplay of opposing yet mutually dependent signifiers. According to both Derrida and Nagarjuna, this co-dependence in linguistic signification precludes the possibility of a pure self-presence not only in language per se but in all language-thought constructs in the domain of philosophy and religion.

They believe that all claims of ontotheological essence in and/or through language are necessarily invalid in so far as they go against the co-dependent rule of linguistic signification. By virtue of this reasoning, Derrida and Nagarjuna proceed from linguistic deconstruction to critiques of onto theologies. Derrida uses the play of a sign to disprove the self-present truth of Being valorised by all Western ontologists and theologians: “the
sign is that ill-named thing, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: what is...?" (*Of Grammatology*, 18-19)

Here Derrida crosses out the name of Being twice (first calling it “ill-named thing”, then over striking it) and puts under rupture. This is because the rule of a sign forbids our conception of Being as a self-present “thing” or our description of it with a copula. As a sign, “Being” must also signify “Non-beings.” By the same token, the *copula* “is,” once posited as a sign, must denote “is not” as well. Owing to this co-dependent rule, a sign, Derrida holds, escapes -- and in fact displaces -- the instituting question of “what is....” For him, it is the instituting question “what is Being?” that gives rise to all the wrongheaded pursuits of the phantom of a self-present truth in Western onto theologies.

Similarly, Nagarjuna exploits the co-dependent rule of linguistic signification to demolish all kinds of ascription of self-identity to the Name or Thing found in the Buddhist ontotheological traditions. The actuality of things cannot be equated with their names, and names in their true meanings cannot be matched by things. This being so, the absolute truth remains tranquil outside of any elucidation through names. How can it be expressed by letters and words? For Nagarjuna, “name” and “thing” are locked in a co-dependent relationship of the signifier and the signified, and allow no space for the existence of an absolute truth. When one perceives “thing” as a signified, its actuality cannot be presenced by its signifier, that is, a “name”. If, on the contrary, one considers
“name” as a signified, its so-called essence cannot be matched by its signifier “things”. On the ground of this inevitable gap between “name” and “thing,” Nagarjuna argues that all claims of “name” or “thing” as absolute truth are mere illusions and that it is utterly impossible to conceive of an absolute truth in and/or through language. The way Nagarjuna plays the “name” and “thing” off against each other reminds us of how Derrida exploits the temporal difference and spatial differentiation between the signifier and the signified for the purpose of expunging the reification of either.

According to both Derrida and Nagarjuna, all onto theologies err in one side or the other of their respective philosophical dualisms -- the Logos versus Matter, Name versus Thing, Being versus beings, Non-existence versus Existence, and so forth -- as essence (a transcendental signified) and denigrating the other side as representation (a signifier). Hence, all Western and Buddhist onto theologies fall into two opposing camps. Those who valorise “the Logos” or “the Name of Non-existence” are called idealists in the West and Essentialists in the Buddhist tradition.

Those who valorise “Matter” or “Thing” are known as materialists in the West and Realists in the Buddhist tradition. Both Derrida and Nagarjuna readily apply the co-dependent rule of linguistic signification to stage a two-pronged attack on these two opposing camps. They launch the first prong against the reification of the logos by the Western idealists and of the Name of non-existence by the Buddhist Essentialists. They
direct the second prong against the counter reification of Matter by the Western materialists and of the Thing by the Buddhist Realists.

In the opinion of Derrida, all Western idealists from Plato to Heidegger reify the logos on the ground of the “proximity of voice [its phone] and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning.” (*Of Grammatology*, 12) As a corollary to this reification of the phone, the signified, they have banished the gram, the corporeal signifier, from the logos. While Plato and later idealists see the reified logos as an intermediary between the divine and the human realms, Derrida sees it as the Achilles’ heel of Western idealisms. He believes that as long as one can demonstrate the externality of the logos or, to be exact, its phone, all the ontotheological claims by Western idealists will collapse.

For this purpose of ontotheological deconstruction, Derrida coins the word *différance*, which is on the one hand the nominal form for the French verb *differer* (which means both “to differ” and “to defer”) and on the other a dissimulation of the French noun “difference.” First, this neologism calls into question the reification of the phone by Western idealists, because it is not the phone but the gram of *différance* that makes its meaning understood. If heard but not read in French, *différance* is bound to be confused with the noun “difference.” Thus, *différance* exposes the false anteriority of the phone and its alleged primacy over the gram. Second, *différance* spells out the fundamental rule for linguistic signification.
A sign cannot exist unless it differs spatially and is deferred temporally from the signified. This ever-receding gap between the signifier and the signified disjoins the alleged fusion of the phone and the ontotheological essence in the logos. Third, through its spatial-temporal opposition, *différence* reaffirms the co dependence of opposite referents as the necessary condition for linguistic signification.

The phone can convey the idea of phonetic tenor only through the intimation of the non-phonetic tenor. No word can exist without presupposing the existence of its opposite. That is, A cannot be called A unless A also signifies or implies the existence of non-A. For Derrida, this threefold operation of *différence* rules out the possibility of taking the logos as the transcendental signified. *Différance* will condemn all logocentric concepts – “*eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia* [essence, existence, substance, subject], *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness or conscience, God, man, and so forth” *(Writing and Difference*, pp. 279-280) to an infinite circularity of signifiers and will render them incapable of presencing a transcendental absolute.

Derrida in his book *Positions* holds that all Western materialists counter reify the grammatical, the corporeal signifier, insofar as they elevate Matter to the status of “an absolute exterior.” (64-65) He argues, “the signifier ‘matter’ appears to me problematical...when its re-inscription cannot avoid making of it a new fundamental principle.” (65) Among different forms of materialism (realism, sensualism, empiricism, and so forth), Derrida singles out Marxist doctrine as a typical Matter-reifying
philosophy, because it has turned Matter into an absolute cosmological and socio-historical principle. As Matter the signifier has been “reinstituted into a transcendental signified” by Marxists and other materialists, (65) Derrida deems it imperative to deconstruct it through the same operation of différance. “The concept of matter,” he writes, in his book Positions “must be marked twice (the others too): in the deconstructed field-this is the phase of overturning -- in the deconstructing text....” (67).

When he first marks the concept of matter in the deconstructed field, he strives to dismantle the hierarchy of the logos over matter established by Western idealists. When he re-marks the concept of matter in the deconstructing text, he aims to overturn the order of matter over the logos (“matter/spirit, matter/ideality, matter/form, etc.”) (66) Re-instituted by Western materialists. He calls this two-pronged attack on logos-reifying idealisms and Matter-reifying materialisms “double séance” or “double register in grammatical Practice.” (35). Nagarjuna’s double negation of the Buddhist Essentialists and Realists bears an interesting resemblance to Derrida’s “double séance.”

Derrida and Nagarjuna not only launch two-pronged attacks on Name-valorising and Matter-valorising onto theologies, but also describe their double negation in similar terms. In Positions, Derrida characterizes his deconstructive terms (pharmakon, supplement, hymen, gram, and spacing) as double-negating agents and sums up his double negation as an exercise of “neither/nor”: The pharmakon is neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, neither the inside nor the outside, neither speech nor
writing; the supplement is neither a plus nor a minus, neither an outside nor the complement of an inside, neither accident nor essence, etc.; the hymen is neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference, neither consummation nor virginity, neither the veil nor unveiling, neither the inside nor the outside, etc; the gram is neither a signifier nor a signified, neither a sign nor a thing neither a presence nor an absence, neither a position nor a negation, etc.; spacing is neither space nor time; the incision is neither the incised integrity of a beginning, or of a simple cutting into, nor simple secondarity. Neither/nor, that is simultaneously either or... (43). Likewise, after his critiques of the reification of “name” and “thing” in the passages cited above, Nagarjuna characterizes the Madhyamika double negation as “neither this nor that”:

In his treatise on the Middle Doctrine, The Mulamadhyamakakarika, Nagarjuna puts forward the following discourse, “Things are neither this nor that.” (42) “This” and “that” do not definitely refer to a particular name, but deluded people would believe that they necessarily do. This being the case, [the distinction] between “this” and “that” is from the beginning nonexistent, but to the deluded it is from the beginning not nonexistent. If we realize that “this” and “that” do not exist, is there anything that can be regarded as existent? Thus we know that things are not real; they are from the beginning only temporary names.

In their rigorous pursuits of neither/nor deconstruction, both Derrida and Nagarjuna ineluctably reach a point where a new dualism arises between their
deconstructive stance and traditional ontotheological views. Therefore they are compelled to deconstruct their own philosophical positions as well as those of others. Derrida’s deconstructive and self-deconstructive practice takes the form of an infinite textual proliferation. In an article entitled, “Nagarjuna and Zeno on Motion,” I.W. Mabbett says that Nagarjuna often, deliberately gets himself

… entangled in hundreds of pages of a writing simultaneously insistent and elliptical... carrying off each concept into an interminable chain of differences, surrounding or confusing itself with so many precautions, references, notes, citations, collages, supplements. (17)

However, the “non-sense” that results from such verbiage takes on a philosophical meaning of its kind, even though it is intended to negate philosophical meanings and positions. As to how to interpret the meaning of the Derridean “non-sense,” critics are quite divided. Many take the meaning to be that of anti-philosophy or even nihilism, and hold Derridean deconstructionism responsible for what they call the fads of denying humanistic values in present-day literary studies.

Some are more sympathetic to Derrida’s deconstructive enterprise and seek to ascribe a positive philosophical purpose to the Derridean “nonsense.” For instance, Coward in his book *Derrida and Indian Philosophy*, holds that the Derridean “nonsense” is not an aimless linguistic play, but is “itself an ontological process.” (140) while Derrida deconstructs “illusions of permanence, stasis, or presence” superimposed on
language, Coward argues, he pursues the dynamic process of becoming of language as “the means for the realization of the whole (‘the sign’). (139)

Whether one interprets the Derridean “non-sense” in a negative or a positive light, one would agree that it is fundamentally different from the kind of “non-sense” arising from Nagarjuna’s lexical-syntactical deconstructions. Madhyamika deconstructions and self-deconstructions follow a clearly directional path, defined by step-by-step advancements and negations.

Unlike Derrida, Madhyamika Buddhists do not see their deconstructive “non-sense” as a consequence that needs justification. For them, such “non-sense” helps lead to religious enlightenment beyond language and conceptuality. Their deconstructive endeavors are geared to none other than this dawning of Nirvaana upon the transcendence of language and conceptual thinking.

Derrida’s freedom is too much a textual freedom, that it is overly preoccupied with language because it seeks liberation through and in language, in other words, that it is logocentric. The danger is not only that one will try to find a fully meaningful symbol to settle down with, but that one will live too much symbolically, inscribed within an endless recirculation of concepts even if one does not grasp at the ones that are supposed to bring being into our grasp. This becomes a source of duhkha because we still retain a
Nagarjuna’s assault on reason includes an attempted critique of verbal expression and the structure of language. For him, words are conventions devoid of deductively absolute or inductively contextual meaning or relationships to each other. That he himself engages in criticism by means of language does not bother him, because he grants that it functions somewhat on a practical level, in a conventional way, within ordinary consciousness. His goal is as usual to take us beyond words and the illusions he claims they create, into the higher mode of consciousness that puts us in contact with ultimate reality. His means is to demonstrate that language is illogical and futile, putting forward at least two arguments:

(a) He asks, is the subject identical with or different from the predicate? His answer is, If the subject is the same as the predicate, they would be one and it would make no sense to call one a subject and the other a predicate… the sentence would be a tautology. If on the other hand, the subject is different from the predicate, there would be no particular connection between them. In either case, predication is found redundant.

(b) Furthermore, what is the status of the subject before predication? Does it already have predicates predicated of it or not? (i.e. predicates other than the subject
itself). If a subject is without any predicate predicated of it, it is incomprehensible and non-existent. If a subject without a predicate is non-existent, to what does our predicate apply? If on the other hand, the subject does have some other predicate predicated of it before we ascribe a predicate, what further function would be served by ascribing an additional predicate since it already has something predicated of it? If it needs this predicate, then a second and a third can in principle be applied. This would lead to infinite regress.

By such arguments, Nagarjuna seeks to give the impression that language is structurally unreliable and a stupid artifice. His arguments are shaped in such a way as to seem logically orderly and exhaustive, i.e. to consider all conceivable alternatives and eliminate them one by one, so that we have no leg left to stand on. He thus apparently uses some of the methodology of logic to convince us. But of course the descriptions of the nature and role of predication underlying his arguments constitute merely one particular view [2], so that his premises are not in fact exhaustive and only serve to show that his proposed view is faulty and to be rejected.

Thus, consider argument A. Its first premise about tautology is obvious and trivial, being itself tautological. More important, the second premise is not at all evident. The subject may well be “different from the predicate” and yet have a “particular connection” to it. There is no logical basis for Nagarjuna’s proposed implication; the antecedent concept (“different”) and the consequent concept (“unconnected”) are quite distinct. If X
equals Y in all respects, then ‘if X, then Y’ and ‘if Y, then X’ must both be true (though it
does not follow that if they are both true, X = Y, since X and Y may well not be
simultaneous). X and Y are different, means ‘X does not in all respects equal Y’, and so
implies that X and Y are either non-simultaneous, or that ‘if X, then Y’ and/or ‘if Y, then
X’ is/are false. Whereas X and Y are unconnected, means that ‘if X, then Y’ and ‘if Y,
then X’ must both be false, as any lesser such relations between X and Y. Thus, the
former concept is wider than the latter, and does not imply it.

The subject-predicate relation under discussion may and usually is posited as, for
instance, a classificatory one – a relation between an individual and a class, or a subclass
(species) and an overclass (genus), so that the former is included in the latter without
being equal in scope to it. ‘Does not equal’ does not exclude ‘is greater than’ or ‘is
smaller than’ or ‘exists before or after’, or any other non-equal relationship. Nagarjuna
suggests that if the terms are not identical, they cannot be related by the copula ‘is’ – but
this copula was never intended to mean total equation. Nagarjuna cannot change the
convention that ‘is’ is different from ‘equal’; or if he insists on doing so and himself
practices what he preaches, one can simply invent another word for what one means by
‘is’. Since Nagarjuna’s second premise is unwarranted, his attempted dilemma is
dissolved.

Now consider argument (b). The first leg mentions a subject “without any
predicate” and claims it “incomprehensible and non-existent”, so that eventual
predication relative to it is senseless. The second leg therefore suggests that a subject can only have one predicate (if any, see earlier), and that ascribing more of them to it implies in each case that the preceding one did not fulfil its intended function (definition?) so that unending predication would be called for – an impossible task. But these arguments are worthless, because Nagarjuna clearly misrepresents predication; his view of it is a simplistic caricature.

What does one in fact mean by a subject or a predicate? Primarily, an object of consciousness – an individual concrete or an abstract ultimately known through comparisons of such concretes. This does not imply that one considers all existents as objects of consciousness, but only that as of the moment one thinks of something one must admit it as appearance and therefore as existent. Moreover, we need not and do not consider consciousness as invariably correct and all its objects as real – we may well conceive of an illusory object, which has no existence other than in the way of appearance.

Secondly, this object (be it real or illusory) may be, and indeed has to be, cognized before we can name it and verbally predicate anything of it. Predication, like its terms, is an object of consciousness before it is put into words. Consciousness of terms and propositions about them may be wordless; words are merely useful concretizations of intended objects of cognition. Also, before terms are brought together in a proposition, the objects intended by the terms have to be known (or believed, verbally or not)
somewhat; the proposition serves to add to that knowledge of the terms, by observing or hypothesizing a certain relation between them. Nagarjuna tries to suggest the opposite, that we only know things in the framework of predication (and perhaps, of prior verbalization), and that predication merely elucidates or restates knowledge (or belief) already present in the terms. But one may reply that something can well exist without/before being thought of, and be thought of alone without/before being verbalised; and even if/when named, it remains comprehensible without/before being made the subject of any non-verbal or verbal predications; and furthermore that predications are themselves objects of consciousness and that most of them enrich the meanings of both subject and predicate rather than merely redundantly repeating meanings already in them.

Nagarjuna also apparently confuses predication with definition, when he considers that a single predication must suffice. In truth, any number of predicates may be ascribed to a subject; predicates are numerous because they are not tautologies of the subject; every term is a complex with a potential positive or negative relation to every other term. Even definition has no ambition to tell us everything about something, but merely claims to focus on one set of predicates, which seemingly abide invariably and exclusively with the subject; and a definition may turn out to be erroneous.

In conclusion, Nagarjuna’s above arguments prove nothing but the incoherence of the particular view of discourse he presents, and do not succeed in invalidating all discourse. The superficial form of his arguments is usually logical enough. But it is not
enough to give logical form to our rhetoric, i.e. that the conclusion follows from the premises – the premises themselves have to be first be found obvious or reasonable. It is the premises of Nagarjuna’s arguments that one contests above as naïve and misleading; and so the conclusion is merely that Nagarjuna’s conclusion is not convincingly established. The theory of predication and underlying processes that one rebuts with may not answer all questions about these issues, but it is certainly more thought-out and closer to the truth.

To the objection that his use of language to communicate his ideas and arguments implies an assumption (which he denies) that language contains knowledge of some reality, Nagarjuna replies that language is “conventional”. This vague accusation of divorce from all reality has little content, so long as it leaves unexplained just how – in convincing detail – such convention functions otherwise (for language evidently does function, as his using it admits). We can also point out that although words are in principle mere conventions, it does not follow that knowledge is “conventional”.

First because that proposition, as a factual assertion, claims to know something beyond convention about knowledge; and as regards content, it claims the impossibility of any non-conventional linguistic knowledge (including, presumably, the knowledge the proposition itself imparts); whence, to assert that linguistic knowledge is conventional is self-contradictory. Secondly, all conventions imply factual knowledge: you have to know that there is a convention and what that convention is supposed to be and how to apply it
correctly! One cannot have a convention about a convention… ad infinitum – it has to stop somewhere factual. Knowledge of conventions is also knowledge; a convention, too, is a reality in itself. It cannot float on infinity of empty conventions; it has to finally be anchored on some real appearance.

Thirdly, because the conventionality of words is misunderstood. Affixing a label on something, arbitrarily or by agreement, does not imply that the ‘something’ concerned need not be previously known. We can be aware of things, and even think about them, without words. Words merely help us record rational products; giving us a relatively tangible instrument to manipulate.

The value of words is not in making conceptual and logical thought possible, but only in making it easier (facilitating memory, classification, communication). Convention is therefore a secondary aspect of words; what counts is their meaning. A language composed only of meaningless words; each entirely defined by others, would have to be infinite in size, and would anyway communicate nothing outside itself.

If the language is finite, like ours, it is bound to be based on some undefined prime words, and thus (since content is only verbal, here) be devoid of content, incommunicado. It could not even communicate its own conventions. Thus, Nagarjuna’s dismissal of language as such is an incoherent thesis, which upon closer scrutiny proves inconsistent with itself.
Thus one could find Derrida’s view of language quite similar to the view held by Nagarjuna. As said earlier, in Nagarjuna one can find what Derrida has been looking for and hence it would be judicial and rational to call Nagarjuna as the forefather of Derrida and the whole lot of Derridean thoughts and philosophy in spite of the facts that they are millennia apart and haven’t had any direct contact. The concluding chapter which follows would sum up the findings of this research that would be of some importance in the East West comparative study and thought.