

## Deconstruction exercise

Deconstruction, as a theoretical approach to understanding how text makes sense (or not), wants us to look very closely at words and at the relationships between words, asking ourselves what those words *really* mean and what those relationships *really* imply, before we begin to overlay all kinds of implied or assumed meanings on the text. Deconstruction wishes us to practice the “unmaking” of the text in order to demonstrate the fact that words always mean more, and less, than we say they do, and that there is always more, and less, to say about what words mean. The way deconstruction accomplishes this demonstration of the essential “openness” and uncertainty of text is to continually ask hard, even absurdly probing questions about what words actually communicate as we move through a given text. It practices this “deconstruction of common sense” until the meaning we had all assumed was there all along can actually no longer be discerned amid the rubble of fragmented language that now disagrees with itself in almost every way imaginable.

We can practice this process with a picture and text combination. We do this in order to make deconstruction a bit easier to understand as a theoretical construct, a bit more transparent, so that we begin to see the act of deconstruction as really just a (radical) process of questioning *ourselves* and our constant, stubborn insistence to always make things mean just one thing...and in the process closing out the possibility for any other meaning(s) along the way, even ones that could be equally valid and enlightening. Take the following images taken in a train carriage:



We can generate a few of our own deconstructive questions as we seek to read and “unread” this text:

- ✓ What’s the setting of the picture? Where are we?
- ✓ What are these signs supposed to communicate, and to whom?
- ✓ Why are there two signs in such close proximity to each other, and why does one cross out the picture of the dog while the other does not?
- ✓ How is one sign, let alone two, going to be useful to people who can’t read to begin with – either because they’re blind, or illiterate, or speak other languages than English?
- ✓ Doesn’t the yellow sign imply in both words and image that only the dog – a particular breed of dog, wearing a harness – can board, but not the human presumably accompanying the dog? Isn’t the dog privileged here, while the human is figuratively and literally “locked out”?
- ✓ Do we think this sign makes any real sense at all? There are no humans in the signs, nor in the words. So who are these signs really speaking to, exactly? If blind people, their presumed target audience, can’t see them, and dogs can’t read them, and sighted people don’t generally travel with dogs on trains to begin with, who are these signs for?
- ✓ Are these just “signs” of confusion, ultimately?