

**READING BETWEEN THE LINES: LACAN'S LINGUISTICS AND
LINGUISTICS'S LACAN**

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Abstract

The Unconscious, said Lacan, is structured like language. With subsequent statements like "Language is the condition for the Unconscious"(Lemaire xiii), Jacques Lacan united the two disciplines of (structural) linguistics and psychoanalysis in a union that changed both for good, gave the latter a scientific status and modified the former, making room for subsequent improvements. His interpellation of various disciplines -anthropology, philosophy, literature -particularly structural science of language and speech with psychoanalysis, transformed and developed many fields of study. Influenced by and extending Saussure's ideas, Lacan's thoughts exhibit a transition from Structuralism to Poststructuralism. This paper will attempt to examine Lacan's preference to linguistics (esp. Structural linguistics), its effects and see how the Unconscious is the whole structure of language. It will also study the revisions Lacan made to the Saussure's linguistic sign with regard to psychoanalysis, tracing his divergence from Saussurean linguistics to beyond and the extent of his divergence.

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To set the scene, psychoanalysis's profound concentration with language needs to be comprehended. Why linguistics? One may ask; for the reason that psychoanalysis's theory and praxis lie in language. The recourse to the science of language permits the science of unconscious to be articulated. When Freud had termed repression as a failure of translation and deemed symptoms as words trapped in body, he had begun the correlation of the two disciplines which would survive beyond imagination. Psychoanalysis as talking cure has only analyser's speech as its object; only linguistic procedures of interpretation and no other tool than language. Linguistics was not some latest scientific development but what was both the subject and instrument of investigation in psychoanalysis. Equating psychoanalysis with a reading process, he proved that unconscious is not the irrational, illogical and ineffable aspect of mind. Lacan shows how Freud's references to literature and language were not coincidental as the Unconscious's notion is concerned in terms of language. He believed that Freud himself had anticipated the premises of Saussure's doctrine.

Prior to language, Saussure suggests addressing the connection between thoughts and language, our thought is a "shapeless and indistinct mass" (Saussure 111-112) and we would be unable to make a clear cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. There are no ideas before the appearance of language. Language serves as a link between thought and sound, taking shape between two shapeless masses. Saussure imagines language as a piece of paper: thought is front and the sound is back. One side cannot be cut without cutting the other one. This piece of paper is twisted by Lacan into a Moebius Strip, eliminating the transparency between the signifier and the signified, convoluting the easy passage from the word to the meaning.

For Saussure, linguistic sign is represented as a two-sided psychological entity consisting of a signifier and a signified (S_d/S_r). The sign unites not a thing with a name but a concept and sound image which is the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression it makes on our senses (and not the material sound). Going one step ahead, Lacan reverses, rather literally turns the Saussurean formula over its head. Giving primacy to signifier, lacan sees it as S/s "which is read as: the signifier over the signified, 'over' corresponding to the bar separating the two stages" (Lacan 149). Apart from swapping their positions, he questions the somewhat parity between the two terms by graphically accentuating the signifier as an uppercase letter (S) and placing the signified as a lowercase letter (s) underneath the bar(rier). Moreover, the circle surrounding the sign and the twin arrows of Saussure's sign (which suggest the mutual dependency of the signifier and signified) are also absent, highlighting the lack of unity (that Saussure had assigned to it). For Lacan the signifier and the signified are the two networks of relations which do not overlap. The primacy of the signifier and the emphasis on the bar imply the relationship within a network of signifiers rather than on an equal link between signifier and signified. The signifier is defined by its oppositions to the other signifiers at a given level of possible comparisons. The signified on the other hand is given weight only by its relations to other elements of the sentence. Moreover, the same signifier can relate to different signifieds. Each word in the sentence acquires meaning through the inter-relational play between the elements of sentence. But this meaning is never fixed in a stable manner. A single signifier implies a series of references to other words (both synonyms and antonyms). Just like looking up a word in dictionary and arriving at a tautology.

Recognising the rhetorical dimension underlying human experience, Lacan postulates that the subject's entry in the symbolic order is the entry into the laws of structures of language.

Language becomes the precondition for the act of becoming aware of oneself as a distinct identity. Appearance of language is simultaneous with the primal repression which constitutes the Unconscious. The subject becomes a subject to language, precisely to the signifier as “the structures of language exist prior to the entry that the subject makes there at a certain moment of its mental development.”(Lacan148). Man constitutes himself as a subject in and through language. The subject alienates himself in language by constructing his Ego. Ego is Imaginary but the subject is linked to the Symbolic. As a result of his initiation into language, the subject gets divided into two parts: unconscious and conscious discourse. He is split by the laws of the language to which it is subordinate. This divided subject emerges at moments of discontinuity. The subject as a subject of the Unconscious holds appeal for Lacan.

Language is used to say something different from what it says if it is taken word by word. Lacan in “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud” shows precisely this by a quote from Paul Valery:“No! Says the Tree, it says No!in the shower of sparks / Of its superb head” (qtd. in Lacan 155). Like in this example, it is only through metaphoric and metonymic exercises that the meaning is achieved and differed from signification. This makes language autonomous from meaning.

In Saussure’s scheme of things, language as a system is emphasised, whereas for Lacan, study of speech holds greater significance. These modifications become obvious in light of Lacan’s conception of the Unconscious.

(Here it becomes necessary to explain the distinction between language and speech as Lacan saw it. Language is an abstract structure while speech requires a listener as well as a speaker. Speech has a subject that strives for recognition of desire. This recognition opposes the existence of the Other a place from which the subject is being heard and recognised. Therefore the Other is the place of the language; external to the speaker and yet (since he is the speaker) internal at the same time. Providing an identity to its speaker, the speech gives one a place. But the language blocks this identity. Subject is no longer recognised but abolished.)

This unconscious constituted by a series of chains of signifying elements, employs the linguistic means for self-expression. The two basic dialectical operations of segmentation and substitution are utilised in linguistic analysis. By applying the same linguistic model to psychoanalysis’s data, the subject is understood in terms of a schema composed of layers of structures which is not very unlike the Freud’s topographical distinctions between Conscious, Preconscious and Unconscious. These methods of metaphor and metonymy, displacement and condensation are the primary processes the Unconscious relies upon to express or distort itself. The major stylistic effects of metaphor and metonymy authorize substitutions of signifier. These twin axes of language follow precise and distinct linguistic laws. These initiate a vertical chain of contextual signifiers linked by similarity of meaning. The Unconscious, housing a structure of signifiers that keep replacing and substituting each other, follows the same rules. The same relationships of associations govern the repressed which is the order of signifiers. The study of symptoms gives a structure which is metaphorical, where one term is substituted for another which is kept repressed. The repressed ideas need to be linked to the rest of the signifying chain and undergo a new translation. The thought too progresses through metaphoric trains of thought and through metonymic progressions. This is why Lacan stresses upon the stylistic devices which are closer to mechanism of thought, rather than the laws governing the syntactic organisation of sentence.

The Unconscious structure cannot be reached in its truth by the logical analysis of the Ego. The Unconscious insinuates itself into conscious discourses propelling itself through the lacunae in that discourse. These lacunae are the formations of the Unconscious: dreams, jokes, and absent-mindedness. The Unconscious structure becomes the first structure while articulating language. 'I' of the discourse is separated by the Other of the subject, the Unconscious. As a mediator, the language distances the 'I' which speaks and believes itself to be telling the truth for the Unconscious reality which houses the truth. The content of the discourse is important only as far as it exhibits the formations of the Unconscious in it exposing a new context. The new language that of the Unconscious is what interests the analyst. The analysand's speech is like a rebus which has to be investigated to arrive at the meaning underlying the utterance. Its semantic value is subordinate to its language. The subject of utterance which is constantly pervaded by another dimension of speech, is less important than the subject of enunciation (the unconscious subject)

The metaphor and metonymy are reinterpreted in their relation to desire. The metonymical chain becomes the logic of desire which is found upon lack because of its inaccessibility of proper meaning; while the metaphor is the moment of abolition of proper meaning. Hence, in linguistics the bar separating the signifier and the signified symbolises the mind's detours in search of meaning; in psychoanalysis it becomes the repression of the signified which remains inaccessible with the help of analytical techniques.

Lacan sees the act of the psychoanalyst as grounded in communication and dialogue and his task as that of interpretation of language. His powers are those of a translator conferred upon him by the linguistic structure inherent in the Unconscious. He rejects ego-psychology which reinforces the Ego and views the Unconscious as the seat of instincts. Lacan is not a linguist but a psychoanalyst so his discourse is the discourse of the other; therefore his fascination with signifier and its infinite symbolic detours of meaning.

In course of his evolving notions of language and psychoanalysis, Lacan declared that linguistics does not prove very helpful when it comes to grasping something of the Freudian unconscious and its subject. Instead of psychoanalysis's progress by its unison with structural linguistics, he conceded, that it was linguistic science itself that would benefit from his psychoanalytic espousal of Structuralist ideas. Lacan mentioned that science of linguistics is secondary to *linguisterie* (*linguisterie*) which is a certain (per)version of linguistics which makes an allowance for the process of saying in its relation to the (subject of) the Unconscious.

Did Lacan create a linguistic psychoanalysis or he just used the terminology to enrich the subject which still had the very substance of Freudian thought underneath it? Did he subvert Saussure's sign to make it a workable model for psychoanalysis? When asked was not he infusing psychoanalysis with a foreign substance, Lacan countered that structural linguistics entailed the most advanced continuation of Freudian psychoanalysis. He begins with Structuralism but dodges being a structuralist as he did not do away with the subject and the notion of subjective agency, neither did he replace it with autonomy of linguistic structures. Using, criticising and advancing Saussure's ideas, Lacan ushers in a superstructuralist approach, making his distortion fruitful.

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