

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's psycho-linguistic theories are rooted in the tradition of Structuralism as well as in the Freudian psychoanalytic model, which involves a morphology of Conscious and Unconscious realms of the psyche. Structuralist thinkers including Claude Levi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure examined the relationships within structures such as culture, religious mythology, linguistics, etc., and found that, as mechanisms which generate meaning within the context of their own symbolizing systems, these structures share a basic universal form. Lacan's main contribution to linguistic theory is his proposal that the Unconscious is structured like language, implying therefore that language is a manifestation of the structure of the Unconscious. While this theory presupposes Structuralism, Lacan is in fact considered an influential Post-Structuralist thinker due primarily to his focus on the subjective and his divergence from Saussure's views on the relationship between the signifier and signified. In his study of linguistic structure, Saussure assumed the relationship between signifiers and their signifieds to be relatively fixed, so that the signs which language structure uses actually mean what they signify and mean only that. Lacan, however, sees that in order for language meaning to evolve and to differ from one culture to another, the signifier (the word used) must be able to shift in meaning and the signified (the concept meant) must always be provisional.

For Lacan and other Post-Structuralists, the signifier and signified of a sign can undergo "glissement" (slippage), which is a reversal of the content and/or function of the signifier and signified. The relationship of signifier to signified corresponds to the relationship between a denomination of money and its assigned value. Monetary value is arbitrary, not measured in terms of the actual value of the metal in a coin or the paper on which it is printed, but rather by that particular coin or bill's designated 'meaning' within a system of relations to others of differing value. This then points to a grey area in signification which has come to be called the "gap". Lacan is interested in how this gap is manifested in and by the human psyche. He identifies the linguistic gap as the unattainability of the intended meaning of a given signifier due to the contextual limitations imposed on ultimate meaning by the unique ontology of not only each

language system but also each individual psyche. Lacan then locates a corresponding gap in the psyche itself as a split between the Self and Other and between the Conscious and Unconscious mind, asserting that this psychological gap is simultaneously creating and created by the gap in linguistic signification.

Lacanian psychoanalytic method thus operates on the assumption that a person's linguistic patterns reveal important characteristics of their psychic state. For Lacan, language is the key to the Unconscious inasmuch as the instability of the signifying chain in linguistic structure symbolically represents and embodies the striving of the human psyche towards an unattainable Object of Desire. The concept of an unstable chain of signification refers to the provisional quality of signifieds embedded within their symbol system, and thus to the open-endedness of meaning implicit in signifieds which in turn function as signifiers of other signifieds, and so on. Lacan's style of discourse and use of terminology is itself representative of his fascination with the potential of the human subject to create and discern multiple layers of meaning in the metaphorical game of signification. Further on we will see examples of the word-play and associative leaps in logic he uses to convey the multidimensionality and ineffability of meaning.

In order to examine why and how Lacan believes language to be the structural condition of the Unconscious, we must first delineate his conception of the role language plays in the developmental process of our psychic ontology. In his model of child psychological development Lacan observes that the human infant is born into a unique state of prematurity in which it initially experiences complete chaos of the senses and is without any awareness of the borders between itself and Otherness. As the infant becomes aware of the movements of its caregivers it begins to recognize the potential for its own mastery of motor coordination and to realize the parallels between the parts of its own body and those of others. Thus the first identification is actually an identification with the Other, since there is as yet no 'Self'. This primary identification precipitates the child's Self-individuation via an internalization of the 'ideal imago' of its own reflected image,

which takes place between the ages of 6 and 18 months in what Lacan calls the "Mirror stage". We will see that it is significant for Lacan that this is also the stage at which language production begins.

At this point of development, the child has begun to be fascinated by its reflection in the mirror and to form an image in its mind of its own bodily wholeness and its distinctness from others. The subsequent identification of the Self with this visual 'body gestalt' is idealistic in that it is fixated on the image of physical completeness which the child as yet does not experience in terms of its actual mastery of coordination. The imago of the Ideal "I" becomes a goal towards which the child strives and a lens through which it proceeds to interpret reality. By 'interpreting reality', we mean that the child begins to discriminate between what is itself and what is not itself and that this formation of an identity involves the assimilation of some stimuli and the negation, or repression, of others. It is this binding together of elements which are identified with the Self that is the genesis of the "Imaginary" register of the psyche; the first phase in Lacan's reinterpretation of the Freudian Oedipal complex. The Imaginary is a parallel concept to Freud's Ego, and engenders the same narcissistic need for self-comfort aimed at by a homeostasis within its own boundaries. Corresponding to the 'Seduction' phase in the Freudian Oedipal model, the formation of the Imaginary instigates the child's drive toward the Object of Desire which it mistakenly identifies as the 'Other' of its own reflected imago.

With the formation of the Imaginary, its opposite or negative is implicit in the exclusion of parts of the whole of reality. According to Lacan, this undefined 'Otherness' thus forms the psychic register of the "Real"; the second Oedipal phase corresponding to the 'Primal' phase in Freudian theory. The Imaginary, like the Freudian Ego, is threatened by the return of the repressed in the form of pressure from the Unconscious to acknowledge the material that has been kept outside the boundaries of the Self. In Lacan's analysis, by excluding from our Self-defined world various elements and forces of the reality from which we select, we separate our Conscious Self from the

realm of Otherness which constitutes the contents of the Real and which henceforth becomes the only valid Object of Desire. The Self/Other split created by the formation of the Imaginary and the Real causes an ontological sense of lack and also a desire, first for the Mother of our primary identification and later for the Other of the repressed Real. Similar to the 'Id' in Freud's triadic model, the Real is defined as the unknown, the unimaginable, and the negation of the Imaginary Self in potential Nonbeing.

It should be pointed out that the Unconscious, although it has access to elements of the Real, does not itself constitute the whole of what has been excluded by the Imaginary. The Real is a concept which signifies the limitless totality of all Nonbeing (negation, lack, absence, etc.) repressed by the 'innenwelt' (innerworld) and the 'umwelt' (outerworld) of human culture, and thus much of this content is ineffable, even to the Unconscious mind, as it lies outside of any form of signifying order. The third phase of Lacan's model is that of the "Symbolic" through which the Real may be indirectly accessed by the Unconscious and, to some extent, the Conscious mind. With its operation on both Conscious and Unconscious levels and its capacity to sublimate the energies of Unconscious drives, the Symbolic register of the psyche is consistent with the Freudian 'Superego' and its internalization corresponds to the 'Castration' phase of the Freudian Oedipal complex. The contents of the Symbolic are the internal and external Law of the Father (i.e.: "NO"), cultural resources such as the languages of art, religion, ritual, myth, and linguistic metaphor in general as a plurality in levels of meaning.

Lacan reinterprets Freud's biology-based theory of the Death Drive along the lines of psychic energetics, incorporating it into his own psychological model and relating it to the transformation of the Self through the Symbolic, which occurs as a resolution of the Oedipal complex in the final stage of ontological Self-development. Lacan's theory suggests that the 'death' referred to by the Freudian Death Drive is not a biological death, but is in fact a yearning for the death of the limiting Imaginary register, which is equally as threatening to the psyche as

physical death because the Imaginary is identified with the very unity of the Self. Furthermore, in contrast to Freud's view of desire as an Unconscious libidinal drive toward psychic unity, and of the Oedipal complex as a desire for union with the Mother, Lacan sees desire instead as a drive toward ontological unity with Nonbeing (the excluded contents of the Real), and thus sees the Oedipal complex as a desire for the "(M)Other". This play on 'Mother' and 'Other' is an instance of Lacan's use of language to exemplify his own theory. The gap in signification is furthermore symbolized for Lacan in the 'emptiness' of the Mother's female reproductive organ. In Lacan's estimation, the Phallus is the universal signifier due to its erect striving potential to 'fill the gap', and therefore it most comprehensively represents the insatiable desire for the death of the Imaginary, with the unattainable contents of the Real being the true Object of our desire.

Our Unconscious desire for the death of the Imaginary is experienced as an ontological lack of wholeness, a potential negative complement to the positive assertion in the narcissism of the Ego. This desire to break the bonds of the Imaginary stasis is at once both threatening to the egotistical Imaginary and necessary for the growth of the Self. According to Lacan this fact explains the paradox of a 'drive toward death' and relates desire to his theory of its sublimation in the metaphorical discourse of the Symbolic order in the resolution of the Oedipal complex. As an individual matures, they enter into the Symbolic realm through the language of culture and thereby develop the capacity to see points of view other than their own and potentially to glimpse Unconscious aspects of the Real in the form of an awareness of possibilities greater than themselves. Lacan asserts that it is the polysemic nature of linguistic signification which is essential to its power as a tool for moving us beyond the boundaries of the Imaginary.

Our desire for ontological unity with an 'unknowable Otherness' comes nearest to being satisfied in the Symbolic register of language, due in part to the fact of the overdetermination of signifiers and the provisional nature of signifieds. Lacan views the role of the Psychoanalyst as that of leading the subject to Self-realization through interpretations of the Unconscious as it is

represented in the language of dreams, poetry, puns, slips of the tongue, internal rhythms and rhymes, etc. These forms of unmediated discourse are, for Lacan, the most apt channels for approaching the Self, which is otherwise misrepresented and misinterpreted due to the effects of both the linguistic and psychic gap. The nature of language is such that it conjures up for us, however indirectly, images of the Real through the 'negative' implied in the meaningfulness of every word. Inasmuch as each word derives its meaning from all other words which it is NOT, in the act of signification all other signifiers and signifieds are unthematic but nevertheless operational to meaning. In the terms of Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, "the Being of the word stands out as the figure against the ground of its non-Being."

This then makes it possible to reassess the limiting boundaries of the Imaginary and respond creatively to the repressed Real by means of a dialectical discourse with the Unconscious in which unity with the Other is glimpsed even if never attained. While there is no direct access to the Real because of the psychic split represented in the gap between linguistic signifiers and signifieds, it is an engagement with the realm of the Symbolic which leads to a post-Oedipal re-identification of the Self as linguistic subject. Lacan's theory offers the notion that there is no separation between the Self and the social-Self. Our identity is formed through the vehicle of language, in which we identify ourselves as objectified "I", and are given a name and place in relation first to the Law of the Father and then to the laws of society. Because everything that we are is an echo of what we are not, it follows that we should find ourselves driven toward encompassing as much of the excluded Real as possible in order to continuously redefine ourselves. Because we become reified within the limiting boundaries of the Imaginary, it is only in striving for the death of the Imaginary that we can perceive ourselves as being as evanescent as our language.

This desire to fill the gap, to reach the complete meaning of the sign and of the Self in a unity with the Real, is precisely our drive to, as Sartre puts it, "Be what we are not and not Be what

we are". According to Sartre's Existential Psychology, this ineffability is attainable cognitively and experientially because, although the Unconscious does not exist, the Conscious mind is nevertheless capable of apprehending the Self as simultaneously both a "facticity" and a "transcendence". We are constantly aware of being more than who we are 'being-in-the-world' as a result of our freedom to have chosen and acted differently in the past and to potentially become a different Self in the future. Lacan on the other hand, while he would argue with Freud's biological understanding of it, accepts the basic premise of the Unconscious and proposes that the desired unity of Being and Nonbeing cannot ever be attained because of the ontological split between Self (Imaginary) and Other (Real) and the parallel gaps between signifier/Conscious and signified/Unconscious which are created in the earliest stages of psychological development.

The nature of desire is such that its object, the Other, is always out of reach. Similarly, the nature of language is such that its object, the subject, is always out of reach. As we have seen this correlation between the structure of the human psyche and that of language is far more than just coincidental. Lacan suggests that we are ontologically located in the signifying gap that is informed by intrusions into the Conscious Imaginary of elements of the Unconscious Real. Lacan proposes that it is through the potential use of language to "penetrate my kernel via allusive references and layers of meaning" that the subjective Self becomes an objectified 'I' and thus is united with the unattainable Other, if only for a playful romp within the field of meaning that is afforded us by the Symbolic register.