

# The Letter to the Letter

Jonathan Davidoff

University of Essex

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## **Abstract**

In his 1957 text ‘The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious’, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan investigates the nature, composition and functions of the unconscious. Following the post-structuralist tradition, Lacan bases his re-reading of Freud on Saussure’s linguistics, and by doing so comes to the conclusion that the unconscious is structured like a language: composed of signifier chains and structured by the rules of language. Also, he investigates the nature of the signifier and sifts its most simple component and functions, namely the letter. This explanatory analysis of the foresaid text aims to follow step by step the development carried out by Lacan and to explain what we think he established in it.

**Keywords:** Lacan, unconscious, post-structuralism

## **Essay**

Lacan is known by many for his subversive contributions to the psychoanalytic domain, and known by many others for his contributions to the philosophical field. It could be said that Lacan was the ultimate metaphysical psychoanalyst, for not only did he contribute to psychoanalysis in terms of clinical and empirical notions, but also in terms of the ontological status that the subject has; of the place and functions that the unconscious should have in the psychoanalytical experience, and of the constitution of the subject in general. It is probable that Lacan would never view himself as a metaphysical thinker, and his followers would hardly agree to this idea insofar as Lacan follows, as will be expounded in this paper, Ferdinand de Saussure’s non-referential theory of language.

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Nevertheless, it is important to say that Lacan made crucial contributions in terms of the 'substance of the unconscious', not by attributing to it any essence, but on the contrary, by sifting its ultimate and most simple component, namely the letter. In 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious' (1957) Lacan pursues the search of the letter and concludes that the unconscious is structured as a language. An explanatory analysis of this text is the objective of the present paper.

Lacan begins by pointing out how the psychoanalytical experience uncovers the structure of language in the unconscious, implying that the unconscious would not be a reservoir of fantasies or impulses, but something else. He points out that language is the ultimate structure and that it precedes the talking subject, even if it is only by his given name. Thus the subject would be then subject to language. He continues by addressing the metaphysical issues of language: the object of language would never be the-thing-in-itself, but the concept. According to Lacan, in language the-thing-in-itself is reduced to nothing, to a name.

It is important to bear in mind that Lacan finds himself submerged in the post-war psychoanalytic world, which was mostly led at the time by the Ego psychology and the Object Relations psychoanalytical streams, which held very different notions of the unconscious. Lacan found that the theoretical inconsistencies in psychoanalysis were vast, and that there were many misinterpretations of Freud's work, mainly in the hands of the ego psychologists in the United States. Lacan was also heavily influenced by the main philosophical discourses at that time in France, namely Structuralism, post-Structuralism, post-Hegelianism and Heidegger. It is from this context that Lacan elaborated his own psychoanalytic notions to achieve a more scientific psychoanalysis, not in the sense of a more empirically based approach, but an approach that would have a more consistent logical structure. To describe the structure and function of the unconscious, Lacan drew upon the work of a key structuralist, namely Ferdinand de Saussure.

In the 'Course of General Linguistics' (1916), Saussure developed a structuralist approach to linguistics. He gave words and speech a logical structure that would define their function. In order to explain the functioning of language, he coined the notion of a linguistic symbol, composed of a 'signifier' and a 'signified', and explained how they interact with each other and with other signs. For Saussure, signifier and signified are like two sides of the same sheet. The signified would be an idea and the signifier would be a word, such as it appears in his classic example of the 'idea of the tree' being the signified, and the word 'tree' the signifier that signifies that idea. For Saussure, every

symbol was arbitrary and closed in itself, and the relationships between the signs were determined by the laws of language, for instance, the laws of metonymy and metaphor. Metonymy is the form of the relationship of one sign to the next by contiguity, and metaphor would be the form of the relationship between signs where the signifier of one sign substitutes the signifier of another. Of course, Saussurean linguistics is far more intricate than that, but this fragmentary account of it perhaps suffices for the purposes of this paper: to follow Lacan's steps.

Lacan had found, in this approach to linguistics, the terms that he felt were needed to give a logical structure to the Freudian unconscious. This logical structure, according to Lacan, represented a return to a more faithful and accurate way of reading Freudian concepts than the dominant American and British approaches of the time. Lacan retook the notion of sign, signifier and signified and, still attributing these inventions to Saussurean linguistics, he changed what these notions stood for and their structure as it follows:

$$\frac{S}{s}$$

The signifier is above the bar and is denoted with a majuscule S; the signified would lie below the bar and would be denoted with a minuscule s; the circle that Saussure had put around the sign was eliminated by Lacan and the bar would stand for the resistance to signification. More importantly, this was no longer a linguistic sign, but an algorithm, and it would cease to stand for the relation of signifier to signified, but for the signifier's function.

Lacan attributes primacy to the signifier over the signified. This does not mean that the signifier stands for the signified or that it represents it in any way. Lacan says that 'the signifier enters in fact into the signified; namely, in a way that, not being immaterial, raises the question of its place in reality' (Lacan, 1956, 151), this means that the signifier has an actual entrance to the signified; not only does the signifier signify the signified, it also modifies it. Says Lacan: '...these units are subjected to the double condition of being reducible to ultimate differential elements and of combining them according to the laws of a closed order (Lacan, 1956, 152)'. Thus Lacan explains that the signifier has two main rules that dictate its structure: it is composed of (or articulated by) ultimate differential elements (phonemes or letters) and it is composed by them according to a closed order or chain. Subsequently, signifiers would also form chains. These chains are what will be for Lacan the unconscious: chains of signifiers that remit one to the next. Says Lacan: 'the

signifying chain, gives an approximate idea: rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings' (Lacan, 1956, 153).

Regarding signification (the signified), Lacan says 'for we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning 'insists' but that none of its elements consists in the signification of which it is at the moment capable' (Lacan, 1956, 153). In the chain the signified (meaning) insists, but it is not contained in the elements of the chain: there is a sliding of signification under the signifiers chain. By this, Lacan points out how the psychic system works: there would be chains of signifiers that would constitute the unconscious, which are not containers of any signification whatsoever, and on another level there would be a sliding of signification that would be the speech of the subject, and meaning. Between the signifiers and the signifieds, we find the bar which Lacan points out as 'the resistance to signification'; this bar would stand for the impossibility of achieving the full signification of the words pronounced by the subject, therefore, it is possible to assume that this bar is the same bar that Lacan says traverses the subject (\$), as it would represent castration as experienced by the speaking subject. Therefore, the bar also stands for repression; the repressed would then be signifiers.

For Saussure, the signifier chain is lineal, monophonic and horizontal, implying that what is being said corresponds to what is actually being said (the enunciation corresponds to the enunciate), whereas for Lacan the chain is polyphonic and has the structure of a pentagram, for there are many levels of what is being said when the subject speaks. The punctuation signs would be like vertical lines that traverse the horizontal chains, like synchronic cuts made in the deployed speech. And the chain, says Lacan, operates only by being present in the subject. This structure of the chain reveals that it is possible to say (or imply) a very different thing than what is being said, for 'the function of the word is not 'disguising thought', but to indicate the place of this subject in the search for the true' (Lacan, 1956, 155). The chain of signifiers will be then, according to Lacan, the place where the subjective dimension appears in what is being said.

Where is the subject to be found in the chain? In order to answer this, Lacan explains the proper function of the signifier in metonymy. One signifier remits to the next one, says Lacan, a metonymic function of remission from one signifier to the other is what constitutes the main function of the chain. In other texts, Lacan coins the notion of 'metonymic desire', in order to explain how, in this sliding of discourse and of the signifier chain, the subjective position is revealed and therefore its

desire. An illustration of this would be an analysand that talks during the psychoanalytical session; thus he freely associates one theme with another (metonymically) and the analyst is able to sift the subjective position of the analysand by listening to his speech and paying (a floating) attention to the 'pentagram' of the analysand speech, and also by paying (a floating) attention to surrounding what his discourse slides. Later in his work, Lacan points out that the subject has an evanescent nature, and that it is between signifiers. Lacan terms this the *aphanisis* function of the subject.

Thus, Lacan follows the Saussurean model of the linguistic mechanisms, and claims that those same mechanisms order the unconscious. 'Metonymy' is one of the mechanisms that ordain the functioning of the chain, but there is another mechanism of equal importance, namely the metaphor. 'Metaphor', states Lacan, 'occurs at the precise point at which the sense emerges from non-sense' (Lacan, 1956, 158). Lacan, following Saussure, explains that a metaphor is the substitution of one signifier by another, creating an *explosion of sense (meaning)*. Every unconscious formation (dream, lapsus, symptom, joke, or parapraxis) has a metaphoric structure, for one signifier has been substituted by another. For example, in the hysterical conversive symptom, a part of the body (not due to its corporeal importance, but to its signifier nature) is substituted by another signifier; the signifier 'throat' is substituted by another signifier, ending in the impossibility to swallow, or cough, or whatever manifestation the symptom might have. In the metaphor, the resistant to signification bar is traversed, achieving full signification; in Freudian words, the unconscious formation has somehow escaped repression and manifested in a metaphoric way.

Metaphor and metonymy are both linguistic mechanisms, but also the mechanisms of the unconscious. This is what Lacan finds in his reading of Freud's claims on displacement and condensation, and both are essential mechanisms in dream work, symptoms and in every unconscious formation. The Freudian discovery of free association as a way to access the unconscious is what Lacan calls 'metonymy'. Every other unconscious formation, fully invested with meaning (or signification), dreams being the quintessence of them, are what Lacan calls 'metaphor'. To understand psychoanalysis in this way is what Lacan refers to with his insistent 'return to Freud', as it is possibly an more intellectually mature approach to the essential Freudian claims, that were in many ways dismissed by the psychoanalysis of that time.

The question of the letter remains unresolved. It is possible to say that the letter is what it is: the letter is a letter, any letter. Lacan says: 'But how are we to take this 'letter' here? Quite simply,

literally (*to the letter*). By letter I designate that material support that concrete discourse borrows from language' (Lacan, 1956, 147). The letter then, is the simplest component of the signifier, by itself it does not mean anything (with the obvious exception of single letter words such as 'I' and 'a', but in these cases, the letter is the full signifier), it has to be contiguously opposed to other letters in order to compose a signifier, and we could assume that the letter is the graphical and conceptual representation of a sound, which as we know, only acquires its full tonality and emphasis when opposed to other sounds or letters, making thus doubtful the representational character of the letter. It is remarkable that Lacan found in such a simple and basic element, present in culture ever since writing emerged, the substance of the unconscious; and even more so when the unconscious was conceived at that time as a 'deep and vast container'. Moreover, the letter is that border-element between language (therefore culture) and the psyche.

To take the letter to the letter is not only the way Lacan explains that a letter *is* a letter; it is also a political statement that will mark the position of the analyst towards the subject, and of Lacan's way of understanding psychoanalysis. If the letter is what the signifier is composed of, and the unconscious is constituted by signifier chains, then the analyst should listen to the letter (of) the subject's speech. This can be interpreted as a political argument against those who, according to Lacan, neglected the centrality of the subject in the psychoanalytical practice; but also as an ethical claim, for it points out that the analyst should not make *himself* the interpretation, the interpretation must come essentially from the subject's speech. Thus the more the analyst bares this in mind, the more he will grant the subject the place that only belongs to it.

### **Bibliography**

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