
Language as the Structure of the Unconscious: Revisiting Lacan

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Abstract:

This study examines the relationship between the unconscious and the linguistic system through the theoretical framework of Jacques Lacan. Challenging the traditional view of the unconscious as a reservoir of instinctual drives and repressed contents, Lacan reconceptualizes it as a structure governed by principles analogous to language. The research explores Lacan's proposition that "the unconscious is structured like a language" This statement became a cornerstone of Lacanian psychoanalysis and marked a significant shift from a biological and instinctual interpretation of the human mind to a linguistic and symbolic one. It analyzes how linguistic mechanisms such as signification, metaphor, and metonymy shape unconscious processes. Drawing upon Lacan's engagement with structural linguistics, particularly the distinction between the signifier and the signified, the study investigates the ways in which desire, subjectivity, and identity are mediated through symbolic systems. It further examines the role of language in the formation of the subject and the manifestation of unconscious meanings in dreams, slips of the tongue, and other symbolic expressions. By highlighting the inseparable connection between language and psychic life, the paper demonstrates that the unconscious is not a chaotic or irrational domain but a structured network of signifiers that continuously influences human thought and behavior. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of psychoanalytic theory and offers insights into the interdisciplinary intersections of psychology, linguistics, philosophy, and literary studies. Ultimately, it argues that Lacan's linguistic reinterpretation of the unconscious provides a significant framework for understanding the construction of meaning and the complexities of human subjectivity in contemporary critical thought. By concentrating on the intersection of language and the unconscious, the research seeks to demonstrate the continuing relevance of Lacan's ideas in understanding human identity, desire, and meaning-making.

Keywords: Unconscious, Linguistic System, Jacques Lacan, Language, Psychoanalysis, Structuralism.

Jacques Lacan: An Introduction

Jacques Lacan was a French psychoanalyst, psychiatrist, and one of the most influential intellectual figures of the twentieth century. Born in Paris in 1901, Lacan received his medical training in psychiatry and later became deeply engaged with psychoanalysis. He attended the University of Paris Medical School and completed his psychiatric training in Parisian hospitals. In 1932, he earned his doctoral degree in medicine with his thesis, "On Paranoid Psychosis in its Relations to Personality" which examined a famous paranoia case and marked the beginning of his intellectual career.

Alexandre Kojève had a profound influence on Jacques Lacan, particularly through his interpretation of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. "In his studies he had particular interest in the philosophic work of Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. He also attended the famous seminars on Hegel given by Alexander Kojève." (Jacques Lacan: A Post Structural Psychoanalyst. Pg. 1) Kojève argued that human beings are driven by a desire for recognition from others rather than merely by biological needs. Lacan adopted this idea and developed it into his theory that human desire is fundamentally shaped by the desire of the Other. Kojève's analysis of the master-slave dialectic also influenced Lacan's concept of the formation of the ego, especially in the Mirror Stage, where identity emerges through recognition and misrecognition. Claude Lévi-Strauss influenced Lacan through structuralism, emphasizing how social and cultural structures shape human experience.

While he regarded himself as a faithful interpreter of Sigmund Freud, Lacan significantly reinterpreted Freudian concepts through the perspectives of linguistics, philosophy, and structuralism. Lacan's work sought to return to what he considered the original insights of Freud, which he believed had been diluted by later psychoanalytic traditions. Drawing inspiration from the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and the structural analysis of Roman Jakobson, he argued that human subjectivity is fundamentally shaped by language and symbolic systems. His famous assertion that "the unconscious is structured like a language" transformed the study of psychoanalysis and established a new framework for understanding the human mind. Among Lacan's most important contributions are the concepts of the Mirror Stage, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real orders, as well as his theories of desire, identity, and subject formation. According to Jacques Lacan, human subjectivity is structured through three interconnected orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The Imaginary Order emerges during the Mirror Stage, when a child identifies with its mirror image and forms an ego based on an illusory sense of unity and completeness. The Symbolic Order is the realm of language, culture, laws, and social relations. By entering language, the individual becomes part of society and acquires meaning through systems of signs and rules. The Real refers to what lies beyond language and symbolization, encompassing experiences that cannot be fully expressed or represented, such as trauma, loss, or intense anxiety. For Lacan, these three orders constantly interact to shape human identity, desire, and the unconscious, demonstrating that the self is not fixed but is

produced through language, social structures, and encounters with what exceeds representation. His ideas have influenced not only psychoanalysis but also literary criticism, philosophy, cultural studies, film theory, and feminist thought.

Drawing upon the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and the work of Roman Jakobson, Lacan argued that unconscious processes operate according to the same principles that govern language. Rather than viewing the unconscious as a hidden container of thoughts and emotions, he conceived it as a dynamic network of signifiers that shape human subjectivity, desire, and identity. According to Lacan, dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes, and symptoms reveal the workings of the unconscious because they are structured through linguistic mechanisms such as metaphor and metonymy.

Lacan's theory has had a profound impact beyond psychoanalysis, influencing fields such as literary criticism, cultural studies, philosophy, film theory, and gender studies. "At the same time, Lacanian thought now pervades the disciplines of literary and film studies, women's studies and social theory and is applied to such diverse fields such as education, legal studies and inter-national relations." (Jacques Lacan by Sean Homer pg. 01). His emphasis on language highlights the role of symbolic systems in constructing individual experience and challenges traditional notions of a stable and autonomous self. By situating the unconscious within the realm of language, Lacan offers a new framework for understanding how meaning is produced and how desire is articulated within social and cultural contexts. Although often regarded as a complex and challenging thinker, Lacan remains a central figure in contemporary theory. His work continues to provide valuable insights into the relationship between language, the unconscious, and the construction of human identity.

Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud's Theory of the Unconscious:-

Jacques Lacan reinterpreted the theories of Sigmund Freud through the lens of linguistics, philosophy, and structuralism. While Freud viewed the unconscious as a reservoir of repressed desires and memories, Lacan argued that the unconscious operates like a language. "Lacan's work has transformed Psychoanalysis, both as a theory of the unconscious mind and as a Clinical practice. Over 50 per cent of the world's analysts now employ Lacanian methods." (Jacques Lacan by Sean Homer pg. 01). His famous statement, "the unconscious is structured like a language", transformed psychoanalytic theory and offered a new understanding of human subjectivity. Sigmund Freud proposed that the human mind consists of conscious, preconscious, and unconscious levels. The unconscious contains repressed desires, memories, instincts, and conflicts that are inaccessible to conscious awareness but strongly influence thoughts, emotions, and behavior. According to Freud the unconscious mind is a reservoir of hidden wishes, fears, and memories, especially those related to childhood experiences. When unacceptable thoughts and desires are pushed into the unconscious to avoid psychological distress is what he calls it repression. He states that human behavior is influenced by unconscious motives rather than occurring randomly.

Dreams provide a disguised expression of repressed unconscious desires. Mistakes in speech or action reveal unconscious thoughts and conflicts.

According to Sigmund Freud, the human personality is composed of three interacting parts: the Id, Ego, and Superego. The Id is the primitive and unconscious part of the mind that seeks immediate satisfaction of basic instincts and desires, operating on the pleasure principle. The Superego represents the moral standards, values, and ideals learned from parents and society, acting as an internal judge that distinguishes right from wrong. Between these two stands the Ego, which operates on the reality principle and tries to balance the impulsive demands of the Id with the moral restrictions of the Superego while taking account of real-world circumstances. Human behavior, according to Freud, results from the continuous interaction and conflict among these three forces.

The unconscious is the largest and most influential part of the human mind, containing thoughts, memories, desires, fears, and conflicts that are hidden from conscious awareness. Freud argued that many of these unconscious contents are repressed because they are painful, socially unacceptable, or emotionally disturbing. Although individuals are not consciously aware of them, these unconscious forces continue to influence behavior, dreams, slips of the tongue, emotions, and personality. He compared the mind to an iceberg, where the conscious mind is only the small visible portion, while the vast unconscious lies beneath the surface and shapes much of human thought and action. Psychoanalysis aims to bring these hidden unconscious conflicts into consciousness so that they can be understood and resolved. Freud's theory revolutionized the understanding of human psychology by emphasizing the powerful role of unconscious processes in shaping personality and behavior. It laid the foundation for psychoanalysis and influenced psychology, literature, cultural studies, and philosophy. Freud viewed the unconscious as a hidden storehouse of repressed instincts and desires that continuously shape human behavior. His theory provided the basis upon which later thinkers, especially Jacques Lacan, developed new interpretations of the unconscious. Freud considered dreams, slips of the tongue, and symptoms as expressions of the unconscious.

Lacan agreed but emphasized that these expressions follow linguistic rules. According to Lacan, the unconscious communicates through symbols, metaphors, and signifiers rather than hidden instincts alone. Influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan argued that meaning is produced through relationships between signifiers. Human identity is shaped by language before conscious self-awareness develops. The unconscious is therefore a network of signifiers rather than a storehouse of instincts.

Lacan introduced the concept of the Mirror Stage to explain the formation of the ego. The child recognizes its image in a mirror and identifies with it as a unified self. This identification is an illusion, creating a gap between the true self and the perceived self.

Language, culture, and social laws constitute what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order. The individual enters this order through language and becomes a social subject. The unconscious is deeply shaped by these symbolic structures.

Lacan did not reject Freud, rather he reinterpreted psychoanalysis through language and symbolic structures. He expanded Freud's theory beyond biology and instinct by reconnecting psychoanalysis with linguistics and structuralism. His view that the unconscious is structured like a language transformed the understanding of the human mind, making psychoanalysis relevant to modern theories of culture, identity, and communication.

The Unconscious and the Linguistic System

The relationship between the unconscious and the linguistic system is a central idea in the theory of Jacques Lacan. Reinterpreting the work of Sigmund Freud, Lacan argued that "the unconscious is structured like a language." According to him, unconscious thoughts do not exist as chaotic instincts alone, rather, they operate through linguistic structures such as signs, symbols, metaphors, and associations. "Nothing created appears without urgency; nothing in urgency fails to sur-pass itself in speech" (Ecrits pg.201). Language shapes human subjectivity from childhood. According to Jacques Lacan, a child enters the social world by acquiring language. Through words such as I, you, son, daughter or student, the individual takes up positions within a symbolic system. The subject does not exist first and then use language, rather, the subject is constituted through language. Lacan famously argued that human desire is mediated by language. For example, we learn what is desirable from family, society, culture, and media. Our desires are expressed through symbols and words and often we desire what others desire or what society presents as valuable to us. Thus, desire is never purely natural, it is shaped by linguistic and social structures.

In Lacanian theory, the human subject is fundamentally a subject of language that is formed, structured, and continually reshaped by the symbolic order of language. "Language 'lives' and 'breathes' independently of any human subject. Speaking beings, far from simply using language as a tool, are also used by language; they are the playthings of language, and are duped by language". (The Lacanian Subject pg. 14). As individuals enter the social world, they acquire language, which Lacan calls the Symbolic Order. The unconscious is formed within this symbolic network and expresses itself through linguistic mechanisms. "The subject matter of linguistics comprises all manifestations of human speech, whether that of savages or civilized nations, or of archaic, classical or decadent periods. In each period the linguist must consider not only correct speech and flowery language, but all other forms of expression as well". (Course in General Linguistics pg.6). Dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes, and symptoms are not random occurrences; they function like messages encoded in language and reveal hidden desires.

Structuralism is an intellectual approach that seeks to understand human culture, language, literature, and society by identifying the underlying structures that shape them.

Ferdinand de Saussure, founder of structuralism stated that language is a system of signs whose meanings depend on their relationships with one another. Lacan drew upon the linguistic theories of Saussure, particularly the concepts of signifier and signified. Saussure argued that the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, meaning there is no natural connection between the word "tree" and the actual concept of a tree. Different languages use different signifiers for the same signified. Meaning arises not from a direct link to reality but from the differences between signs within a language system. Thus, language is a system of signs where signifier and signified work together to produce meaning.

Lacan emphasized that unconscious meanings emerge through chains of signifiers rather than fixed meanings. Thus, the unconscious continually produces meaning through displacement, substitution, and association. For example:-When a person consciously says, "I want to become an actress." This unconscious desire may be expressed through a chain of signifiers (words, images, memories): Actress - being seen, Being seen - gaining recognition, Recognition - receiving love or approval, Love/approval - fulfilling an unconscious emotional need. Just as words get their meaning from their relation to other words, unconscious desires get their meaning from their relation to other unconscious signifiers. For example, if the person repeatedly dreams of being on a stage, being watched by crowds, or receiving applause, these are like "words" in the language of the unconscious. The unconscious is communicating a desire through symbols rather than direct statements.

So, Lacan's point is that the unconscious expresses itself through dreams, slips of the tongue, fantasies, symptoms, and symbolic images, much like a language conveys meaning through words and grammar. Thus, the wish to become an actress may be the surface expression of a deeper unconscious desire that is structured through a network of meanings, just as a sentence is structured through a network of words. The two important linguistic processes that explains unconscious functioning are Metaphor and Metonymy. When one signifier substitutes another, it produces hidden meanings which is termed as metaphor and when one desire moves from one signifier to another through association is called as metonymy. For Lacan, psychoanalytic interpretation involves listening to the language of the unconscious. By analyzing speech patterns, repetitions, slips, and symbolic expressions, the analyst uncovers unconscious desires and conflicts.

Conclusion

The unconscious and the linguistic system are inseparably connected in Lacan's theory. The unconscious functions through the structures of language, expressing hidden desires and meanings through symbols and signifiers. This linguistic approach transformed psychoanalysis by shifting attention from instinctual drives alone to the ways language shapes human identity, desire, and subjectivity. Lacan demonstrated that unconscious desires are expressed through linguistic structures rather than existing as purely biological impulses. His reinterpretation of Freud not only deepened the understanding of the human mind but

also established important connections between psychoanalysis, linguistics, philosophy, and literary studies. Consequently, Lacan's theory remains a significant framework for exploring the complex relationship between language, subjectivity, and the unconscious in contemporary intellectual discourse. In Lacan's theory, "the unconscious is structured like a language" does not mean that the unconscious literally speaks in sentences. It means that unconscious desires and thoughts follow rules similar to how language works through symbols, associations, substitutions, and hidden symbols.

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