



Lacan and Post-Structuralism

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Abstract

Lacan's centre of attention was principally on Freud's work on deep structures and infant sexuality, and how the human subject develops into an 'other' through unconscious repression and stemming from the Mirror phase. The conscious ego and unconscious desire are thus thoroughly divided. Lacan believed this perpetual and unconscious fragmentation of the self as Freud's core discovery. According to Lacan, no signifying word can be uttered that does not have overlapping signification with other words. The signified slides under the signifier following the basic rules of post-structuralism. The paper deals with several aspects of social phenomenon and psychoanalysis as a theory of how the human subject is created through social interaction.

Keywords: Structuralism, post-modernism, symbolic order, language, culture, structural anthropology

Lacan tried to treat the unconscious, by simultaneously applying Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, structural anthropology and post-structural theories. The initial project and authentically maintained principle of Jacques Lacan, identified as a post-Structuralist psychoanalyst, was to reinterpret Freud. Lacan always called himself a Freudian, leaving to others the option of labelling themselves Lacanian. This work of exegesis¹ draws him closer to the literary critic. Furthermore, Lacan's own style can be called post-structuralist² and post-modernist³ as well. He revises Freud's theory of the unconscious by means of linguistic terminology and posits three stages of human mental disposition:

¹ an explanation or critical interpretation of a text.

² "Salient features or themes that are shared by diverse types of poststructural thought and criticism include the following: (1) The primacy of theory. Since Plato and Aristotle, discourse about poetry or literature has involved a "theory," in the traditional sense of a conceptual scheme, or set of principles, distinctions and categories— sometimes explicit, but often only implied in critical practice—for identifying, classifying, analyzing, and evaluating works of literature. (See criticism) In poststructural criticism what is called "theory" has come to be foregrounded, so that many critics have felt it incumbent to "theorize" their position and practice. The nature of theory, however, is conceived in a new way; for the word theory, standing without qualification, often designates an account of the general conditions of signification that determine meaning and interpretation in all domains of human action, production and intellection. In most cases, this account is held to apply not only to verbal language, but also to psychosexual and sociocultural signifying systems. As a consequence, the pursuit of literary criticism is conceived to be integral with all the other pursuits traditionally distinguished as the "human sciences" and to be inseparable from consideration of the general nature of human "subjectivity" and also from reference to all forms of social and cultural phenomena. Often the theory of signification is afforded primacy in the additional sense that, when common experience in the use or interpretation of language does not accord with what the theory entails, such experience is rejected as unjustified and illusory, or else is accounted an ideologically imposed concealment of the actual operation of the signifying system." [A Glossary of Literary Terms, Seventh Edition, M.H. Abrams, p. 239].

³ The term postmodernism is often applied to the literature and art after World War II (1939-45), when the effects on Western--

1. the imaginary order
2. the symbolic order
3. and the real⁴

The imaginary order is pre-Oedipal. Here the infant is incapable of distinguishing itself as separate from the mother's body or even to recognize the isolation between its own self and the environment around as it does not know itself to be a separate entity. It is the mirror phase when the child can identify itself and its surroundings in the mirror that marks the point where the comfort of this imaginary order splits leading the child into the symbolic order. The symbolic order is a world that consists of pre-defined social roles and gender differences and also a world of subjects and objects; thus, language.

In Lacan's terms:

"All sorts of things in this world behave like mirrors."

— Jacques Lacan, *Seminar II* (via heteroglossia)

Lacan's centre of attention was principally on Freud's work on deep structures and infant sexuality, and how the human subject develops into an 'other' through unconscious repression and stemming from the Mirror phase. The conscious ego and unconscious desire are thus thoroughly divided. Lacan believed this perpetual and unconscious fragmentation of the self as Freud's core discovery. Lacan thus tried to treat the unconscious, by simultaneously applying Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, structural anthropology and post-structural theories.

According to Lacan 'the unconscious is the discourse of the Other'. It that means that the passion of a human being is structured by the desire of others. A person expresses deep feelings through the 'relay' of others. He thus saw desire⁵ as a social phenomenon and psychoanalysis as a theory of how the human subject is created through social interaction. Desire appears through a combination of language, culture and the spaces between people.

The Oedipus crisis⁶ carries the psychology of a child into the symbolic stage. From this stage they

morale of the first war were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the progressive devastation of the natural environment, and the ominous fact of overpopulation. Postmodernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the counter-traditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to overthrow the elitism of modernist "high art" by recourse to the models of "mass culture" in film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music. Many of the works of postmodern literature—by Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Roland Barthes, and many others—so blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful, that they resist classification according to traditional literary rubrics. And these literary anomalies are paralleled in other arts by phenomena like pop art, op art, the musical compositions of John Cage, and the films of Jean-Luc Godard and other directors. "[A Glossary of Literary Terms, Seventh Edition, M.H. Abrams, p. 168].

⁴ Lacanian psychoanalysis, http://changingminds.org/disciplines/psychoanalysis/articles/lacanian_psychoanalysis.htm.

⁵ Desire is triggered in Lacan's Mirror phase, where the image of wholeness seen by the baby in the mirror creates a desire for that being. Beyond this phase, Lacan argues that the subject, separated from itself by language, feels a sense of absence, of being not fully present, and thus desires wholeness. He calls this sense of something missing as the 'object petit a'. We constantly put ourselves into the subject positions of language and cultural codes in seeking to fulfil the futile desire for wholeness. Jacqueline Rose considers all unconscious desire as making identity problematic or 'unfinished'. She says there is 'resistance to identity at the very heart of psychic life'. Man's desire for woman can be seen as desire for the woman's desire for the phallus. Lacan uses jouissance to indicate the lost object, that which is unobtainable and which always escapes satisfaction. Rose uses this to show that women have a point of advantage in the overall phallic economy, standing in the place of jouissance and thus being perpetually both desirable and ultimately unobtainable. Separation in the Oedipus Complex leads to desire as the boy distances himself from the mother yet still yearns for her.

⁶ The attachment of the child to the parent of the opposite sex, accompanied by envious and aggressive feelings toward the parent of the same sex.

can become a speaking subject. It is not just the father, but language that creates the division. Language is used to represent desire and is an 'intersubjective order of symbolization' and force that perpetuates the 'Law of the father'. The father prohibits the desire of the mother, subverting this desire into language.

Lacan observes that the unconscious is not a place but is a relation to the social world consisting of law and order, religion, morality and conscience. The child internalizes the father's commands (Law of the Father) and the appropriate standards of socially acceptable thought and behaviour as well as the repression of the desire for incest.

Lacan is post-Structuralist and obviously post-Saussurean. Lacan observes the child not as the agent of symbolization but as the recipient of desire from an Other (the Mother). According to him when the child plays with things disappearing and discovering them again, they are recreating the missing mother. Lacan asserts that there are no sexual relations: there is just the individual's relation to the Law and to language, which allow for the continuance of social relationships. Lacanian psychoanalysis thus focuses on deconstructing the narcissistic illusions of the self, allowing the childhood fragmentation and lack of unity of the self to resurface. As desire and connection is created through language, Lacan explains this through the Saussurean terms of signifier and signified.

'Within language, the subject ineffectively tries to represent itself. The subject is an effect of the signifier, put into language. Language becomes a mask to disguise the between people. According to Lacan, 'the unconscious is structured like language'⁷ impossibility of desire. The unconscious is less something inside the person as an 'intersubjective' space'

Being basically a follower of Saussurean structuralism, Lacan acknowledges the splitting up of the verbal sign into signifier and signified. But the relation of signifier to signified is not simple, clear, concrete, and direct.; not only is it arbitrary, arising out of the discriminatory lexicon of a natural language in Saussurean terms, but its denotation is troubled with history and tinged by association. According to Lacan, no signifying word can be uttered that does not have overlapping signification with other words. The signified slides under the signifier following the basic rules of poststructuralism. (Smith and Kerrigan, p. 161). Bornali Nath Dowerah lucidly explains:

"Lacan's entire study of unconscious is based on the verbal signs. Lacan denies arbitrariness of sign, having a constant signified that is well celebrated by Saussure. According to Lacan, there is no constant meaning of a sign, and one signifier leads to another signifier. Lacan, in his investigation, revises the Freudian concept of unconscious and Saussure's theory of signifier and signified. Lacan seems to insist on the metonymic process in his projection and exposition of unconscious."⁸

The decentred-subject of post-structuralism is not Lacan's innovation but it is basically a Freudian project. While Freud displaced the centre of the subject from Descartes' centre in the conscious, in the 'cogito', to the unconscious, Lacan made the unconscious, and therefore the subject, dependent on the 'Other'.

Unlike Freud, Lacan did not analyse the subject as having neuroses but as being spoken by a disturbed unconscious. This is the pathological outcome of Lacan's theory that the unconscious is structured like a language; that the unconscious is like a language. The unconscious speaks the subject. This is where Lapse's theory has the greatest indebtedness to post-Saussurean linguistics. Lacan stated categorically, in an uncharacteristically clear, often-quoted passage:

⁷ Introduction to the Reading of Lacan: The Unconscious Structured Like a Language (Lacanian Clinical Field), 1998, by Joel Dor.

⁸ Lacan's Metonymic Displacement and its Relevance to Post-Structuralism, *The Criterion*, August 2013, Vol. 4, Issue 4, ISSN 0976-8165, Bornali Nath Dowerah.

“the unconscious is structured in the most radical way like a language, that a mate-dal operates in It according to certain law, which are the same laws as those discovered in the study of actual languages, languages that are or were actually spoken.”⁹

Although Freud had characterized the unconscious as anarchical, Lacan defined the language of the unconscious in Saussurean terms of a closed system of signs composed of signifiers¹⁰ and signifieds¹¹—however, with some changes.

The key contribution that Lacan brought was in the importance of language in the formation of the self and psychic and sexual life. In his Post-Freudian interpretation of Oedipal and other early infant sexuality, Lacan saw the female position as being non-essential, a view that was taken up by feminists. The premise of the father snatching the infant from the innocent mother, seducing it into the symbolic order, supported feminist annoyance.

Lacan says that the unconscious is inserted into the symbolic order from the ‘outside’ and is ‘structured like a language’, operating according to differential relationships in language. It thus does not ‘belong’ to the individual and is an effect of signification on the subject.

Contrary to American psychologists who observe the ego at being central. Lacan locates the subjective ‘self’ at the centre, where it is alienated from its own history, formed in and through otherness and is inserted into an external symbolic network. ‘I’ is a fiction borne of a misrecognition that masks a fractured and unconscious desire for reunification that permeates adult life.

There is thus always a space between the ‘I’ of the subject position (into which people are forced by ideology and culture) and the ‘me’ of the subject who speaks. This leads to endless futile attempts to stitch oneself into language in an imagined position where the self can be spoken.

Lacan has also been criticized, in theorizing of sexuality and unconscious¹², as well as the limits of his application of linguistics. First of all, the structuring of the unconscious and tying it to language is criticized as oversimplification and subversion. Secondly, several critics have pointed out that since the unconscious is extremely symbolic it does not follow a structured to syntax. Thirdly, Lacan’s equation of language and culture does not take account of power, ideology and social institutions. Notwithstanding all the limitations, Lacan will be remembered eternally as the pioneer of post-Structuralist psychoanalysis.

⁹ Language, Psychosis, and the Subject in Lacan, John P. Muller, in *Interpreting Lacan*, Editors Joseph H. Smith, M.D. William Kerrigan, Ph.D, Yale University Press, 1983.

^{10.} & ¹¹ According to Ferdinand de Saussure, a ‘sign’ is composed of the signifier (a ‘sound-image’) and a signified (the abstract concept that the sound image represents). The relation between the signifier and the signified is inseparable but arbitrary, a product of linguistic convention. Saussure argues that a sign has no ‘positive qualities’ and acquires its meaning by virtue of being different from other sign in the same linguistic system, e.g. a ‘pen’ acquires its meaning by virtue of being different from a ‘pencil’ or ‘eraser’ and so on.

¹² <http://changingminds.org/disciplines/psychoanalysis/articles/lacanianPsychoanalysis.htm>.

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