
JACQUES LACAN'S LINGUISTIC TURN: THE STRUCTURE OF LANGUAGE, THE UNCONSCIOUS, AND THE DECENTRED SUBJECT

Dr. Deepa Thomas
Associate Professor
Department of English
Deva Matha College, Kuravilangad
Kottayam, Kerala – 686633.
Email: deepatoms@gmail.com

Abstract

Jacques Lacan is one of the most challenging and controversial of the contemporary philosophers as well as the most influential psychoanalyst since Sigmund Freud, the founding father of psychoanalysis. In the history of psychoanalytic theory, it was Lacan, who from the 1950s, with his call for a ‘return to Freud’, had insisted on the necessity of taking forward the theorisation of language in psychoanalysis. Lacanian thought has reached far beyond this, and it now pervades the diverse disciplines of literature, film studies, gender and social theory. He heralds a return to the writings of Freud, in order to discover in his texts, the idea of the ‘unconscious’. Lacan’s texts provide an insight into his richly complex thinking about spoken and written language, about the importance of language for an understanding of the unconscious and the politics of culture, and about the inter-relationships among literature, philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis. This paper seeks to explore the linguistic turn in psychoanalysis taken by Jacques Lacan. After introducing Lacan, it focuses primarily on the language and philosophy in his works. In addition to this, this paper aims to incorporate two topics that Lacan emphasizes in his writings-to demonstrate the link between the structure of language and that of the unconscious; and to provide a comprehensive account of the human subject with reference to ‘decentring’ of the subject. In short, the three main themes explored in this paper are: (1) Lacan’s emphasis on language and linguistics, (2) his theory that the unconscious is structured like a language, and (3) his concept of the decentred/split subject.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Structural Linguistics, Unconscious, Signifier, Decentred Subject

Introduction

Jacques Lacan (April 13, 1901 to September 9, 1981) was a major figure in Parisian intellectual life for much of the twentieth century. Sometimes referred to as “the French Freud,” he is an important figure in the history of psychoanalysis. His teachings and writings explore the significance of Freud’s discovery of the unconscious both within the theory and practice of analysis itself as well as in connection with a wide range of other disciplines. Particularly for those interested in the philosophical dimensions of Freudian thought, Lacan’s *oeuvre* is invaluable. Over the course of the past fifty-plus years, Lacanian ideas have become central to the various receptions of things psychoanalytic in Continental philosophical circles especially.

Lacan's first major theoretical publication was his piece *On the Mirror Stage as Formative of the I*. This piece originally appeared in 1936. Its publication was followed by an extended period wherein he published little. In 1949, though, it was re-presented to wider recognition. In 1953, on the back of the success of his Rome dissertation on "The Function and Field of Speech in Psychoanalysis," Lacan then inaugurated the seminar series that he was to continue to convene annually (albeit in different institutional guises) until his death. It was in this forum that he developed and ceaselessly revised the ideas with which his name has become associated. Although Lacan was famously ambivalent about publication, the seminars were transcribed by various of his followers, and several have been translated into English. Lacan published a selection of his most important essays in 1966 in the collection *Écrits*.

There are few twentieth century thinkers who have had such a far-reaching influence on subsequent intellectual life in the humanities as Jacques Lacan. Lacan's "return to the meaning of Freud" profoundly changed the institutional face of the psychoanalytic movement internationally. His seminars in the 1950s were one of the formative environments of the currency of philosophical ideas that dominated French letters in the 1960s and '70s, and which has come to be known in the Anglophone world as "post-structuralism." Both inside and outside of France, Lacan's work has also been profoundly important in the fields of aesthetics, literary criticism and film theory. Through the work of Louis Pierre Althusser (and more lately Ernesto Laclau, Jannis Stavrokakis and Slavoj Zizek), Lacanian theory has also left its mark on political theory, and particularly the analysis of ideology and institutional reproduction. Lacan's avowed theoretical intention, from at least 1953, was the attempt to reformalize what he termed "the Freudian field." His substantial corpus of writings, speeches and seminars can be read as an attempt to unify and reground what are the four interlinking aspirations of Freud's theoretical writings:

1. A theory of psychoanalytic practice as a curative procedure;
2. The generation of a systematic metapsychology capable of providing the basis for
3. The formalization of a diagnostic heuristic of mental illness; and
4. The construction of an account of the development of the "civilized" human psyche.

Lacan brought to this project, however, a keen knowledge of the latest developments in the human sciences, drawing especially on structuralist linguistics, the structural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss, topology, and game theory. Moreover, as Jacques Derrida has remarked, Lacan's work is characterized by an engagement with modern philosophy (notably Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and Sartre) unmatched by other psychoanalytic theorists, especially informed by his attendance at André Kojève's hugely influential Paris lectures on Hegel from 1933-1939.

Lacan's philosophy of language

The component of Lacanian theory for which it is perhaps most famous, and which has most baffled its critics, is the emphasis Lacan laid on language in his attempt to formalize

psychoanalysis. From the 1950s, in complete opposition to any Jungian or romantic conceptions, Lacan instead described the unconscious as a kind of discourse: the discourse of the Other. There are at least three interrelated concerns that inform the construction of what one might call Lacan's "philosophy of language." The *first* is the central argument that the child's castration is the decisive point in its becoming a speaking subject. The *second* is his taking very seriously what might be termed the "interpretive paradigm" in Freud's texts, according to which Freud repeatedly described symptoms, slips and dreams as symbolic phenomena capable of interpretation. -The *third* is Lacan's desire to try to understand the efficacy of psychoanalytic interpretation as a curative procedure that relies solely on what Freud called in *The Question of Lay Analysis* the "magical" power of the word.

From 1953-63, Lacan concentrated on structural linguistics and the role of the symbolic in the work of Freud. He felt that Freud had understood that human psychology is linguistically based, but would have needed Saussure's vocabulary and structuralist concept of language as a system of differences to articulate the relationship. In *Les Psychoses: Seminar III*, Lacan claims that the unconscious is "structured like a language," and governed by the order of the signifier. This is contrary to the idea that the unconscious is governed by autonomous repressed or instinctual desires. Saussure's linguistic theory, especially on the relation of constant separation between signifier and signified, led Lacan to show that no signifier ever rests on any particular signified. He went on to argue that the Symbolic order, the order of signs, representations, significations and images, is the place where the individual is formed as a subject. He stated that the subject is always the subject of the signifier.

"I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming." (From *Écrits*, p. 34)

Lacan translated Martin Heidegger's work into French and the evidence of Heidegger's influence can be read in Lacan's essay *The Function and Field of Speech in Psychoanalysis*, in which he concentrates on the idea that subjectivity is symbolically constituted. Lacan was also influenced by Hegel's work, and by his discussions with both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. He was the first to introduce structural linguistics to psychoanalytical theory, and because of this he attracted attention both nationally and, later in the 1970s, internationally. He was considered unorthodox and unusual in his psychoanalytical practice, and his lectures were a form of practice alongside his work as an analyst, in that they put his theory into practical form. His lectures made his theory evident: that language can say something other than what it says, and that it speaks through humans as much as they speak it.

Lacan's Reformulation of the Linguistic Sign

Claude Levi Strauss' (1908-2009) structural anthropology was facilitated by the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), and it was through Levi Strauss that Lacan began to read linguistics. In the process he made radical and far-reaching changes to Saussure's

concept of the ‘linguistic sign’. Saussure’s ‘sign’ is a bipartite entity, consisting of a ‘signifier’ and a ‘signified’, which stands for the ‘sound image’ and the ‘concept’ respectively. And the relationship between the two is called signification. Lacan accepted the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, but questioned two of the fundamental premises of the Saussurean linguistics: the indivisibility of the sign and the prioritization of the signified over the signifier. And in this attempt, he reformulates the linguistic sign.

Lacan borrows some ideas of linguistics that Freud did not have access to. As we have seen, Saussure showed that a sign is not necessarily something that connects a word or name to a thing, but is in fact something which connects a sound or image to a concept. The sound or image is called a signifier. The concept is called a signified. Meaning is produced not only by the relationship between the signifier and the signified but also, crucially, by the position of the signifiers in relation to other signifiers (in a given context). When Saussure’s theory is put together with Freud’s it is not difficult to see that the movement of signifiers, which generates meaning, must remain fundamentally unconscious. Meaning may only have a place in what Lacan calls “the signifying chain.” So the signifier has primacy over the signified, which means that meaning is generated not by the normal meaning of a word but by the place the word has in a signifying chain.

The Primacy of the Signifier

In the chapter, “The agency of the letter in the Unconscious”, in *Ecrits*, Lacan’s reformulation of the sign is described in detail. The idea of the bilateral relation between the signifier and the signified, yielding signification, is discarded. The relation is rewritten as an ‘algorithm’ S/s, to be read as the signifier ‘over’ the signified. Lacan’s reformulation now reads: Signifier/signified. The capitalized signifier takes precedence over the signified and the ‘bar’ between the two symbolizes, for Lacan, not the inseparability of the sign, but its fundamental division. The bar functions as a barrier to meaning. What a signifier refers to is not a signified, as there is always a barrier between them, but to another signifier. In short, a signifier refers to another signifier, in an almost endless chain of signification. Signification is always a process-a chain. None of its elements actually ‘consist’ of the meaning or the signified, but rather each signifier ‘insists’ on a meaning, as it presses forward to the next signifier. In that case, meaning is not fixed. As Lacan puts it, “there is an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (26). He retains the differential and the systemic nature of the signs, but only for the signifier.

Having emptied the signifier of its signified, Lacan replaces the term ‘sign’ by the term ‘letter’, which is the concrete support that discourse borrows from language. By way of his diversion, Lacan converts linguistics into a ‘science of the letter’. It is the notion of the signifier, introduced by Saussure and modified by Lacan, which truly revolutionizes the Freudian theory; the signifier is a material structure of language-a ‘letter’-whose chaining produces the subject, which is thus the result of the language. “The ‘letter’ is also connected with Freud’s reference to the rebus-like hieroglyphic structure of our dreams. Corresponding to what Freud describes as two kinds of ‘dream distortions’, condensation and displacement, Lacan specifies two kinds of linguistic structure: the metonymic and the metaphoric. These are also two kinds of the effects of the signifier on the signified. Metaphor, characterized as ‘the superimposition of signifiers’ is

associated with ‘poetry’, and metonymy, which involves the ‘veering off of signifiers’, is associated with ‘the foiling of censorship’. In the formula for metonymy, a bar separates the two signifiers, marking irreducibility of one to the another, and indicating resistance to signification” (Manjali 56). Here Lacan is laying the groundwork for his theory that the letter is simultaneously a metonymy and a metaphor for language, culture and the unconscious.

Lacan’s two main theoretical moves, discussed above, can be summarised as:

- a) Lacan rewrites Saussure’s definition of the sign: it is now the concrete signifier S standing over an essentially unstable signified s; the sign is now defined as an ‘algorithm’ S/s. In their critical reading of Lacan, Nancy and Labarthe call this Lacan’s ‘diversion’ of Saussurean linguistics.
- b) The ‘algorithm’ consists of a potentially infinite chain of signifiers related to each other by way of ‘metaphor’ and ‘metonymy’, which are also Lacan’s linguisticized terms for the unconscious mechanisms that Freud refers to as ‘condensation’ and ‘displacement’ respectively. Having dethroned the cogito, now ‘desire’ is within the Lacanian system naturally the engine of the movement along the infinite chain of signifiers.

In their carefully articulated reading of Lacan’s work, Nancy and Labarthe have pointed out that having ‘diverted’ Saussurean linguistics in establishing the authority of the ‘letter’, and having displaced the cogito, Lacanian psychoanalysis goes on to make ‘desire’ the centre of the new ‘scientific’ enterprise, whose founder would be Lacan himself. The next section deals with Lacan’s view on the discursive constitution of the subject, one of the main concepts of Lacanian philosophy.

The Discursive Constitution of the Subject

The idea of a linguistic/discursive constitution of the subject was started in contemporary scholarship through the writings of Lacan. According to him, the development of the human personality, which begins with the early stages of the child as aspeechless being, involves three stages of its alienation from its real being. At the first stage, with its birth, the child is painfully separated from the mother’s body. This is followed by the famous ‘mirror stage’ of Lacan, wherein the child, still inarticulate both in body and in speech, happens to look in a mirror and forms an apparently complete image of itself. At this stage, which is that of the formation of the ‘ego’, there is a sudden leap from a state of incompleteness to an imaginary fullness of the self. This false realisation that leads to the irrevocable formation of an ‘alienation’ identity for the human subject or his/her ego is referred to by Lacan as ‘meconnaissance’ or miscognition. This ‘ego’ is destined to accompany the subject throughout life, though in various shifting manifestations. The mirror stage represents for the child its first entry into the world of signification. In and through language, the subject experiences its primary alienation with respect to the being or the thing, and of the self.

The subsequent entry into language and the more general symbolic order is perhaps decisive for the child. It is here that the child is forced to accept the pattern of categorizations that language provides it with, especially the one concerning sexual division into the male and the female order. This is where the desire for the opposite sex is set forth, which inevitably has its

manifestations in the human subject's conscious and unconscious patterns of behaviour and especially in the linguistic discourse.

Lacan's main point of argument is that the unconscious is not something that is to be understood by reference to some obscure depth-psychological interpretations. The unconscious can be understood in terms of what gets repressed in the human mind when the child enters the symbolic world, especially language. Consequently, patterns of dreams or neurotic behaviour can be interpreted in terms of an endless chain of signifiers ordered along the metonymic or metaphoric axis. Lacan's is possibly the first contemporary theory to attempt a 'decentring' of the subject (the Cartesian cogito). This he does, by giving primacy to the desire that the unconscious manifests in relation to an intersubjective and materially embodied language that pre-exists the subject, and into which the latter is inserted. The emphasis is on a constitutive lack in the human subject organized around the principle of desire. The Lacanian subject is a split one, and language is the cause of this. We have seen that a young child is introduced through the mirror image in the Imaginary Order. But to become a subject, it has to be introduced in the Symbolic Order.

The Symbolic Order

Lacan, as does De Saussure, sees the linguistic system and not the subject as primordial. Man has to 'subject' himself to the order language imposes on the world. But he also considers narratives as part of the system, which De Saussure does not. He calls this field of language and stories the Other, the Symbolic Order, represented as A. For Lacan, there is no real distinction between speaking and language, between *langue* and *parole*, because speaking can only be speaking when it wants an answer, and therefore the Other is already implied. Because speaking is demanding, A is also the Other as a person, i.e. the community which is addressed and without which there would be no speaking. As mentioned above, the Saussurian theory of the linguistic sign contains a differential definition. He also insists on the unity of sound and meaning. Lacan will do away with both the differential definition and the unity of sound and meaning. For him, the chain of signifiers is the constitutive element. The meaning, the signified, is not given in advance, but comes into being through the game of the signifiers, so the meaning has to be found on the level of the sentences, and is determined by the context. The procedures of selection and combination, of metaphor and metonymy, are used by Lacan to discover the laws that govern the chain of signifiers to process meaning. They are also for Lacan fundamental procedures in the formation of language and significance. What does Lacan say about reference in his theory? The signs mediate a reference to a reality, but this reality is not present in the Symbolisation, but is represented. So the immediacy is lost. The price that is paid for the Symbolisation is thus the loss of the primordial object, the object a, the object of desire. What remains is emptiness, a trace, something reminding of fullness.

Language is of the Symbolic order, one of three orders that constitute the subject in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the other two being the Imaginary and the Real. The Imaginary is the place where the subject fails to see the lack of reality in the symbolic, and mis-recognizes its nature, believing in its transparency. The Imaginary is the place of necessary illusion. At the level of the

Imaginary, the de-centering of the subject that occurs at the Mirror Phase is not acknowledged. The Real can be understood, in one sense, as that that is always "in its place," because only what is absent from its place can be symbolized. The Symbolic is the substitute for what is missing from its place; language cannot be in the same place as its referent.

The Structure of the Unconscious

According to Freud, the unconscious is a realm that does not know time or contradiction; it is a realm of repressed wishes and fantasies. The unconscious is that which is excluded from language. But how can we discuss unconscious wishes and desires if we cannot put them into language? According to Freud, we can detect the workings of the unconscious at precisely those times when our conscious mind is least alert and active in repressing unwanted thoughts and desires. Lacan sought to tackle the paradox which always confronts psychoanalysis: if we can say that psychoanalysis is the discourse of the unconscious, or a discourse upon the unconscious, it is a discourse that rests upon something that is always beyond itself. In short, Lacan tries to articulate through the structure of language something that remains beyond language itself: the realm of unconscious desire. Lacan attempted to replace a depth-psychological interpretation of the images of the unconscious. For Lacan, henceforth, 'the unconscious is structured like a language'. In other words, the images are merely links in the infinite chain of signifiers, produced by the engine of sexual desire, which is nothing else than the desire for the other. It is in this sense that according to Lacan, 'the unconscious is the desire of the other'.

For Lacan, the unconscious has the same structure as language, and is also constituted of a chain of signifiers. Therefore it is also called the Other, A. Symptoms such as dreams are signifiers, and therefore governed by metaphor and metonymy, the Freudian Verdichtung and Verschiebung. The formation of symbols is mainly a metaphorical process, whereas the structure of desire is metonymical. It is a desire for something that is lost, that cannot be obtained, as we will see later, and it is projected, deferred to something that can be obtained, but will not, in the end, give satisfaction. This deferring will go on and on.

The Unconscious is Structured like Language

That the unconscious is structured like a language is Lacan's central thesis and probably his most influential contribution to psychoanalysis. The unconscious is governed by the rules of the signifier as it is language. We can only know the unconscious through speech and language; therefore the unconscious is constituted through the subject's articulation in the symbolic order. The Lacanian unconscious is not an individual unconscious, in the sense that Freud speaks of the unconscious. The Lacanian unconscious is rather the effect of a trans-individual symbolic order upon the subject. We can draw from this three related theses:

1. The unconscious is not biological but is something that signifies.
2. The unconscious is the effect - the impact - upon the subject of the trans-individual symbolic order.
3. The unconscious is structured like a language.

Fink argues that the Lacanian unconscious is not only structured like a language but is language, insofar as it is language that makes up the unconscious. This involves us in rethinking, however, what we mean by language. Language, for Lacan, designates not simply verbal speech or written text but any signifying system that is based upon differential relations. The unconscious is structured like a language in the sense that it is a signifying process that involves coding and decoding, or ciphering and deciphering. The unconscious comes into being in the symbolic order in the gap between signifier and signified, through the sliding of the signified beneath the signifier and the failure of meaning to be fixed. In short, the unconscious is something that signifies and must be deciphered.

The unconscious according to Lacan, is governed by the rules of the signifier as it is language that translates sensory images into structure. We can only know the unconscious through speech and language; therefore, similar kinds of relationships exist between unconscious elements, signifiers and other forms of language. The unconscious is constituted through the subject's articulation in the Symbolic Order. The unconscious is structured like language in the sense that it is a signifying process that involves coding and decoding, or ciphering and deciphering. The unconscious comes into being in the Symbolic Order in the gap between the signifier and the signified, through the sliding of the signified beneath the signifier and the failure of meaning to be fixed. In short, the unconscious is something that signifies and must be deciphered.

The Unconscious is the Discourse of the Other

Lacan speaks of the unconscious as quite simply the 'discourse of the Other'. The Other is the symbolic order; it is that foreign language that we are born into and must learn to speak if we are to articulate our own desire. It is also the discourse and desires of those around us, through which we internalize and inflect our own desire. What psychoanalysis teaches us is that our desires are always inextricably bound up with the desires of others.

These unconscious desires and wishes of others reach us through language-through discourse-and therefore desire is always shaped and moulded by language. According to Lacan, just as there is no such thing as the unconscious without language, it is through language that desire comes into being. Unconscious desire, therefore, emerges in relation to the Other-the symbolic order. It is the 'discourse of the Other', insofar as we condemned to speak our desire through the language and the desires of others.

According to Lacan, the human subject is always split between a conscious side, a mind that is accessible, and an unconscious side, a series of drives and forces which remain inaccessible. The cost of human "knowledge" is that these drives must remain unknown. What is most basic to each human entity is what is most alien. This (S) is the symbol that Lacan uses to figure the subject in its division. We are what we are on the basis of something that we experience to be missing from us—our understanding of the other—that is the other side of the split out of which our unconscious must emerge. Because we experience this "something missing" as a lack we desire to close it, to fill it in, to replace it with something. Lacan calls this lack desire. Desire is what cannot be satisfied even when our demands are met. All our needs are at once converted into desires that cannot be satisfactorily fulfilled. This is why sexuality cannot be considered as the result of a need. The unconscious manifests itself by the way it insists on filling the "gap" that has been left by the very thing the subject feels is lacking in him or her, that is the unconscious.

Conclusion

By the late 1970s, the psychoanalytic theory was subjected to criticism for its reductionism, that is to say, for reducing all social and cultural phenomena to psycho-sexual explanations. Whatever else one thinks about Lacan and his influence, the force of his 'return to Freud' has been to make us reconsider the relationship between the unconscious and culture, between the psyche and the social, in radically new and innovative ways. To this day, Lacan's radical, brilliant and complex ideas continue to be highly influential in everything from film theory to art history and literary criticism.

The unconscious and the human desire permeate our representations and create a permanent state of instability and disruption at the very heart of our culture. The continuing relevance and value of psychoanalysis of Lacan, is to hold upon that space and to refuse the 'ideological' closure of a unified, harmonious, conflict-free subject or society as well as to analyse the ways in which desire manifests itself through cultural texts.

The unconscious is structured like a language and functions in ways similar to language: sign, signifier, and signified. In giving agency to language in creating the human and by insisting on the primacy of language as generative of consciousness, Lacan expressed his opposition to the traditional notion of the Self as an independent or transcendent or an absolute entity in the world. The question is why language? Psychoanalysis has but one medium: the patient's speech, and Freud taught his readers that "symptoms," or uncontrolled manifestations of the unconscious, speak in and through words. Symptoms, like dreams, which are linguistic image based narratives, were constructed in phrases and sentences. Freud tried to use language to reach a source or an origin from which the primal pain was emanating, but Lacan insisted that origins can never be located. What is available to the observer is the capacity for symbolization, expressed as language.

The subject exists because of and through language. Because the human agent "knows" or "speaks" only through language, language is the determinant of intersubjectivity or consciousness. Given that the limits of language, not only is there no outside or no meta-language and also no access to the unconscious but there is also no ego without language. The ego or the conscious rational mind is the product of linguistic activity. In other words, the limits of the language and the limits of the consciousness are the same and inseparable. Language operates in terms of connection or putting together and through substitution or alternative that are expressed in Freudian terms of "condensation" and "displacement." Dreams are symbolic symbols that are condensed or combined from concepts that have been suppressed by the conscious mind. This displacement from the conscious to the unconscious forces metaphorical expression which is the stuff dreams are made of. Accordingly, language is not as much descriptive as it is symbolic. Linguistically, the Sign or the Letter is the material support, the Signifier or the Metaphor substitutes itself for the thing it represents, and the Signified—that which has been signified—or the Metonymy, is that which re-represents itself. The result of these processes of connection and substitution is a displacement of meaning along a chain of signification.

According to Lacan, we come into consciousness through language. We are ushered into society through language. The bar/slash between the S and the s is also the veil or the “splitting” that occurs when the unseparated (from the mother) infant is separated (becomes separate) from its mother and is initiated into society through language. The beginning of humanity is the end of the infant’s certainty of fusion and wholeness, the jouissance of bodily contact with the mother. S/he is forever barred and forever split from this undifferentiated fusion through the workings of symbolic (unreal) language. The result of this act of separation, this slash or division, is a trauma that splits the child off and sends him or her hurling alone into society. The map or topography of the resulting separation of the conscious from the unconscious is the alienation of the subject from itself. What is the self? Is that the same as the experiencing subject? Lacan says no: while the self (the ego) is an imaginative creation, cemented by language, the subject is something else, something split (at least initially) between consciousness and the unconscious. Lacan mixes this Freudian picture with semiotics—an emphasis on systems of linguistic symbols—using this to both create his picture of the psyche and explain how psychological disorders arise.

Lacan's theories are difficult to grasp, but extend psychoanalytical thought in several directions. Lacan's unconscious is structured like a language, which gives language a key role in constructing our picture of the world, but also allows the unconscious to enter into that understanding and dissolve essential distinctions between fantasy and reality. There are no primordial archetypes (Jung) or entities beyond the reach of language (Freud) or logical-sensorimotor structures (Piaget). As do other psychoanalysts, Lacan sees mental illness as a product of early childhood difficulties (notably imbalance between the Imaginary and the Symbolic) but children progressively gain a self-identity by passing through pre-mirror, mirror and post-mirror stages of development. More importantly, Lacan's language referred to itself and was to be read by Saussurean semiotics. To the extent that Lacan sees language, and indeed all discourse, as permeated by the unconscious and so lacking in truth or stability, he is a Poststructuralist.

Lacan also had a trinity of his own: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Real is the unnamable, the outside of language. The Imaginary is the undifferentiated early state of the child, a fusion of subject and parent, which remains latent in adult life, manifesting when we falsely identify with others. The Symbolic is the demarcated world of the adult with its enforced distinctions and repressions. The unconscious is not simply reflected in the language we use, but is equally controlled by it. Discourse, including social, public language, shapes and enters into the structure of the unconscious, and is inextricably mixed with the unsatisfied sexual desire that emerges disguised in dreams, jokes and art.

Lacan's thought as summarized above is very much a simplification, with many inconsistencies and obscurities removed. But Lacan's concept of a split in consciousness as we enter adulthood was attractive to those contesting the “closure” and single viewpoints of traditional literature. Lacan's unconscious, which permeates all discourse, and thus undermines all the supposed stabilities of social and public life, was employed by left-wing thinkers viewing modern capitalism as repressive and irrational. Much has passed into history, and we should see Lacan in context — in flight from a Catholic background, friendly through his wife with the

Surrealists, applying his own brand of Freudianism to the events of May 1968 and beyond. But despite the dubious nature of Lacan's concept, his influence lives on. Alienation in modern life, it is argued, comes not only from capitalism, but because we are inevitably alienated on entering the Symbolic realm of public language. In the deepest possible way, we were split at the source of gender. The Imaginary realm of the fused and fluid corresponded to the feminine, but once we employ public language we are thrown into a masculine world of order, identity, coherence and prohibition, a theme taken up by feminist critics. By the time of his death, Lacan had become one of the most influential and controversial intellects in the world. His work has had a significant effect on literature, film studies, and philosophy, as well as on the theory and practice of psychoanalysis.

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