

November Seminar 2019
NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP

Date: Wednesday 27 November 2019

Time: 6-8 pm

Location: Tutorial Room, No.3, NIDA, 215 Anzac Parade

An Introduction to Formations of the Unconscious: (Part-I)

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The function of the signifier in the unconscious

In the preliminary remarks to his *Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious*, Lacan in a nutshell summarizes the topics of his first, second, and third seminars. As he remarks, the first seminar has been devoted to the portrayal of the function of the symbolic in the determination of meaning. The second seminar explores the repetitive insistence in the unconscious and structure of the signifying chain. In the third, Lacan discusses psychosis and the lack or foreclosure of an essential signifier—the-Name-of-the-Father. When the signifier is absent, the real takes hold of its place. It also teaches the crucial mechanism through which the big Other as the mainspring of speech is compacted to the imaginary other, the specular image (the body image)—“the suppletion of the symbolic by the imaginary.” (Lacan, 2017, 6). The real as a radical otherness produces an effect in the ruptures of the delusional (psychotic) speech replaced the source of speech (The Other) to the small ‘dual’ other, the image of oneself in the mirror.

Similarly, in the fourth year of my seminar, I wanted to show you that the only object is a metonymic object, the object of desire being the object of the Other’s desire, and desire always being desire for some Other thing, very precisely for what is lacking, a, the primordially lost object, insofar as Freud shows it to us as always having been re-found. Similarly, the only meaning is metaphorical meaning, meaning emerging only from the substitution of one signifier for another in the symbolic chain. (Lacan, 2017, 7).

Lacan presents his famous formulas for metonymy and metaphor as important but fundamental formations of the unconscious:

$$f(S \dots S') S'' = S (-) s$$

$$f(S'/S) S'' = S (+) s$$

The first formula (metonymy), the signifier S is linked with the second S' in relation to the S'' put the signifier in a metonymic relationship with the signified s. In the formula of metaphor, the substitution of one signifier S and the second, S' in relation to S'', produces an effect of meaning by [S (+) s]. The plus sign means that the new meaning emerges between the signifier and the signified. It also indicates that the slippage of the signifier in the signified, which make the signified another signifier in the signifying chain. On the side of the metonymy [S (—) s] the minus sign implies that there is no chance of the emergence of a new meaning between signifier and signified. Lacan shows the relation between two signifying chains: the signifying chain of the signifiers and the chain of the signifieds in the first Graph of desire that is also called the cell of desire. The two chains cross each other in two points that Lacan calls quilting points, which build a relationship between two chains.

Since, between the signifying sliding chain and the flow of the signified, there is, as it were, a reciprocal sliding, which is what is essential in their relationship, and since, despite this sliding, there is a liaison or coherence between these two currents, and we have to grasp where it appears, it may occur to us that this sliding, if sliding there be, is necessarily a relative sliding, (Ibid, 8).

The signifying chain where the interaction of the metaphor and the metonymy produce a signifying effect that works at all levels from sentence to a phoneme. Lacan stresses on the signifying elements, for example puns, word play, and parapraxes, are the signifying material that “we analysts constantly have to play with,” (9). Literary text, for example, works in this way. The signifying materials are the element that gives us the effect of meaning and signification. They are the semantemes (the smallest and minimal element of meaning). A semanteme doesn't refer to just one item but to a wide range of things. The signifier and its link to the signifying chain is the first point that we meet in a discourse. The source of all these signifiers is the Other. The two intersections that come into being with two arrows (the subject and the signifying chain) shapes a sense of meaning in such a way that the first intersection is called the code and the second, the message—the conjunction of the discourse with the signifier. The message of the I comes from the Other. The I is in contact on the one hand with the metonymic object and on the other with the Other.

Lacan's theory of the unconscious is strictly gravitating around Freud's theory of the unconscious. In the first session of the *Seminar V*, Lacan select Freud's theory of (*witz*), especially the linguistic foundation of the structure of wits in order to illustrate the operational structure of the unconscious. The internal linguistic operation in wits such as anecdotage, logic, laughter, puns, condensation, displacement, substitution and so on, according to Freud are all on a par with the mechanism of the unconscious. Each element of wits has a separate function and an overall goal. For instance, a hostile joke means insult, satire and defence. An obscene joke on the other hand implies the illustration of something bad and nasty. The psychogenesis of wits also includes pleasure, fun, and satisfaction. As dreams and symptom-formation bear witness, all the above mechanism of witticism is related to the primary process that takes place in the unconscious. To give an example, in displacement, one image, one reality stands for another image or reality. In other words, one image functions as a symbol for the other. Similarly, in condensation, two different images are combined to make the third composite image which is invested with meaning and a message. The underlying mechanism that works in witticism and the unconscious is the process of repression or primary repression. An unacceptable idea gets repressed in the unconscious. In the meantime, the opposite mechanism of the return of the repressed and the insistence of what is repressed always force itself to return upon itself. These two processes of repression and repetition are always interacting with one another. Freud wrote his book, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* on this topic to examine the unconscious and its

internal mechanism and operations. Let us tell crack a little joke and see how it gives its covered message and says the bitter truth.

A man was eating honey by itself on a roadside. Looking all this, a passer-by asked the man, “Oh Bro! Don’t eat honey by itself, it will burn your heart.”

The man who was eating the honey laughed and retorted: “I think it is burning your heart.”

Here the man who is eating honey by itself is so smart that realizes a sharp pang of jealousy of his interlocuter and says the bitter truth behind his advice. We may well derive the message of the joke by examining the signifying process involved in jokes.

Lacan by incorporating Saussure’s structuralist linguistic in psychoanalysis reconstruct all the terms used by Freud’s crude linguistics. Lacan introduced psychoanalysis with numerous terms such as the sign, signifier, signified, metaphor, metonymy, other tropes and so on. Following Freud, Lacan suggests that the poets were the first people in the world who knew all about the principle operating mechanisms of the unconscious for they always played with them in their own poetry. Lacan mentions works of the Nineteenth-Century French poets, Mallarmé and Baudelaire as good examples for looking at the unconscious mechanism. Lacan states that Freud himself used works of German poet Heinrich Heine.

“You will see, for example, that there is the problem of witticism and the problem of the comic, and these are not at all the same thing. Similarly, the problem of the comic and the problem of laughter, even though these sometimes go together, and even though all three get confused are not all the same problem.

In short, to clarify the problem of wit, Freud starts with signifying technique, and we too will start from there along with him.

What is curious is that this takes place at a level about which absolutely nothing indicates that it’s at the level of the unconscious...the unconscious, in fact, is only ever illuminated and only reveals itself when you look away a little. This is something that you will rediscover in *Witz* all the time, for it’s in its very nature—you look away and this makes it possible for you to see what is not there.” (Lacan, 2017, 15)

Lacan himself picks a neologism from Freud *famillionaire* and show therein the work of condensation. The neologism appears as a slip of the tongue where two words, *familiar*, and *millionaire* are peered where phonetically *aire* and *milli* are common between both words. As a process of condensation, the two words are combined to make a new formation *famillionaire*. In other words, the combination is condensed in the slip, *famillionaire*.

Lacan also clarifies two important issue in Freud’s *Jokes and their Relations with the Unconscious*, namely, the comic and witticism. The comic has dual relation like the joke of honey above, the relation between two persons, the one who eat the honey and the jealous one who give advice to the first. Witticism involved in the comic situation will need the third party that Lacan calls the Other who must confirm the message. Lacan emphasizes that discourse and message comes from the Other. This means that the message of the joke must be codified by the Other—which here means society and culture.

Freud is constantly stressing the difference between witticism and the comic, which is due to the fact that the comic is dual. The comic is a dual relation, and there has to be a third Other for witticism, he says in the code, 'This is witticism'. If no one observes it, if 'familionaire' is a slip, there is no witticism. It's therefore necessary that the Other codify it as a witticism, that it be inscribed in the code through the Other's intervention. (Ibid, 18)

The method involved in witticism is a linguistic technique involved in the production of meaning and signification. The linguistic mechanism is what he calls, 'condensation' and 'displacement'. In every wit or poetic creation, according to Lacan there are two undercurrents, the one belongs to the signifiers and the second current to the signified. By examining the signifiers, we are engaged with the signification because the signifiers are the ones that signify. The current of the signified which is the plane of meaning but in a deferred manner that never presents a specific meaning. Here too, as Lacan hinted elsewhere, the signifier is stuffed into the signified. This part is always overlooked in Derrida's deconstruction that accuses Lacan for being logocentric and caught up in the metaphysics of presence. What Lacan says is that the signified isn't a fixed signified as such but a new-born signifier in the chain.

Lacan summarizes his comments on the witticism in the slipup neologism: '*famillionaire*' that was recycled in Freud's book from an actual conversation between two famous Jews, Hirsch-Hyacinth and Heinrich Heine. The witticism in the slip is related to the cultural humour about a millionaire individual as the Other. In German, millionaire is called *millionarr* meaning 'scatter-brained' millionaire. Lacan adds to that French humorous nickname, *le fat-millionaire*, which means "the conceited millionaire," (22).

Lacan suggest that his formula of metaphor can answer the mechanism behind the formation of the neologism, *famillionaire* that compresses two words, familiar and millionaire.

Lacan in the seminar repeatedly makes references to his essay in *Ecrits*, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," a source that he revises his previous position with regard the structure of the signifiers in the unconscious.

On this point, I must insist that you all familiarize yourself with the example I gave in 'The Instance or the Letter' of what I call the essential functions of the signifier, insofar as it's by means of them that the ploughshare of the signifier ploughs the signified into the real, literally evoking it, making it emerge, working it and creating it. They concern the function of metaphor and metonymy. (Ibid, 23)

Lacan refers to the unreadability of his own writing. He states that his style is synonymous to his self that he is unable to change. He also alludes to his own style as part of a discourse that touches with the unconscious.

It seems that for some people it's my style, let's say, that makes it impossible to read the article.

I regret it, but there's nothing I can do about it—my style is what it is. I ask them to make an effort here. I will just add that whatever deficiencies have been introduced by my own personal doing, there is also something—perhaps they are half-aware of this—that corresponds to the very object in question in the difficulties of this style. (Ibid)

Lacan argues that the existence of the signifiers necessitates the presence of an articulated chain where they are grouped and linked together by the rings of the chain. The linkage of the signifiers implicates two, “dimensions, one that can be called the combination, continuity or concatenation of the chain, and one of substitution, whose possibilities are always implicit in each element of the chain. The second dimension is left out of the linear definition. The second dimension is given to the relationship between signifiers and signifieds. In other words, in every linguistic act, while the diachronic dimension is essential, synchrony is also implied or evoked by the permanent possibility of substitution inherent in each of the signifying terms. (23-24)

Lacan discusses his comments by examining a line from Hugo’s poem, *his sheaf was neither miserly nor hateful*, (24). This line which tells about the biblical legend of Ruth and Boaz, in which the later dream about being the father of the race. Lacan suggests that the metaphor *here* substitutes Boaz for Sheaf. The sheaf itself evokes the seeds and paternity and provide a new meaning for Boaz as the paternal figure. The name Boaz is barred and omitted from creation of the new meaning which connote paternity. Metaphor always give ways for engendering a new meaning and a new cover to something and someone for its function of metaphoric substitution. In each metaphor this happen that the substitution of one thing for another, the new meaning and the new thing finds new, deeper, meaning that makes the reality what Lacan calls ‘pure opacity.’ For instance, the metaphors of ‘moon’ and ‘rose’ for ‘beautiful faces’ make the meaning of beauty and the beautiful face more ambiguous and intense. Lacan generalises this fact and sees such mechanism of substitution for engendering further nuances involved in the constitution of language. Lacan also reveals that as Freud in his book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, there is a close kinship between witticism, forgetting, and parapraxes, as they seem to be written in the unconscious. The forgetting of the proper names and foreign names also belong to this category. Following Freud, Lacan suggests that the forgetting of the proper names is not ‘absolute forgetting’, hole or gap, but a space where other names pops up from the unconscious. In such forgetting, the ones aimed by the person escapes from the memory in order to release another name or silence. Since the proper name that has been dropped out from the consciousness, brings such a forgetting a proper name which is considered as parapraxes. The new name that takes the place of the intentioned proper name, isn’t just a coincident or mistake, but another formation in the unconscious that Lacan calls deformation and formation process in the unconscious.

Substitution is the articulation; the signifying means whereby metaphorical action is instituted. This doesn’t mean that substitution is metaphor. If I teach you to proceed down all these pathways in an articulated manner here, it’s so that you don’t constantly misuse words. To say that a metaphor is produced at the level of substitution means that substitution is one possible way to articulate signifiers, that metaphors exercise their function of creating signifieds in the place where substitution can occur, but they are two different things. Similarly, metonymy and combination are two different things. (32)

Notes:

Lacan, Jacques, (2017), *The Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious*