

NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP: March Seminar

# Lacan's Theory of Four Discourses

*Date: Wednesday 21 March 2018*

*Time: 6-8 pm*

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

All our utterances and modes of speeches whether or not we know them or simply all forms of communications in a given culture inexorably fall into four major categories of fundamental discourses that Lacan terms the discourse of the *master*; the discourse of the *hysteric*; the discourse of the *university*; and the discourse of the *analyst*. The moment one begins to speak, he/she has been already inscribed within one of these categories of discourses. The discourse thus determines the act of speech that a speaker uses. Inscription to a discourse is related to a social link in language, connecting linguistic and discursive elements. Each discourse relies on a configuration of the signifiers in its linguistic structure, and each discourse produces decisive effect on the subject who produces it or receives it on the other end of the spectrum.

The Saussurean structuralist linguistics led Lacan to locate social bonds in language and subsequently take our understanding beyond Lyotard's modes of grand narratives, which is a generalized view of the social and cultural mechanism, engendering and regulating different discourses. According to Lyotard, the knowledge gets its legitimacy from the grand narratives especially its speculative and political types. Lacan's four discourses instead enables us to micromanage the production and changing of the discourses on the ground of our position within social bonds in language. Lacan postulates his theory of the discourses in quasi-algebraic formulas with their four component elements:  $S_1$  = master signifier;  $S_2$  = the battery of signifiers (the unconscious knowledge);  $\$$  = the barred subject (barred by the signifier); object  $a$  = the object cause of desire (the lost object with the division of the subject) and the surplus *jouissance*. The roles that these elements play in the following two pairs of formulas determines the types of the discourses.

The agent / truth  $\rightarrow$  the Other / production, loss

The elements at the top, *the agent*, *the Other* are the manifest and overt factors whereas the elements at the bottom, *the truth* and *production* are the latent or repressed factors. Similarly, "the left-hand positions are occupied by the factors in the active in the subject speaking or sending a message; and the right-hand positions are occupied by the factors that the subject receive the message is summoned to assume." (Bracher, 1994a, 109). Each discourse has a sender and a receiver as well, the arrows in each formula indicates both sides.

From Lacan we also know that the master signifier(s) is the dominant factor that gives meaning and signification to the signifying process, for instance, masculinity, femininity, God, democracy and so on are all master signifiers that make the messages in language understandable. The master signifier is also the means for our identification as a journalist, a

scientist, a woman, a hysteric or a political leader, and so on. Barred subject is the subject of the unconscious which is divided by the advent of the signifier in human life. The object *a* is an irreducible part and an inassimilable real of the Other that causes our desire while remaining as the object of our desire as well. It represents the primordial lack and loss from which desire arises. The master signifier is related to the Name-of-the-Father that plays a great role in the formation of social and cultural bonds. Every symptom begins when the master signifier, which has a loosening grip on the type of discourse. In psychosis, for example, the master signifier is dysfunctional and foreclosed. Therefore, a psychotic discourse is unable to produce a sustainable meaning.

A discourse is the master discourse if the master signifier(s), S<sub>1</sub> takes the position of the agent, the barred subject \$, takes the position of the truth, the unconscious knowledge S<sub>2</sub>, occupies the position of the other and the object *a* holds the position of the outcome and production. The production here implies the generation of a surplus enjoyment. This production is in response to our utterance and the type of discourse we use. Lacan's theory opposes Marx's theory of discourse that is regulated by the subject's ideological standpoint and an access to the means of production. It also contradicts Foucault's theory of discourse which is structured by power relationship. The position of the agent guarantees the hegemony of knowledge in the discourse of the university, the hegemony of the power in the discourse of the master, and the hegemony of the divided subject (symptom) in the discourse of the hysteric. It is important to notice that Lacan reduces the analyst discourse from the master and the university because the analyst doesn't dominate or control the analysands during the analysis. The position occupied by Socrates in the *Symposium* is the position of the analyst that signifies the role of an object *a* for Alcibiades. This defies the position of a psychiatrist in modern psychology and psychiatry. Lacan situates his master discourse primarily in a dialogue with Hegel, especially when he discusses his idea of the master and slave, for Lacan shares with the latter the core of the function of desire. It is interesting to note that Lacan in his different seminars assigns Hegel to the discourse of the 'sublime' hysteric as well as to the 'sublime' discourse of the university, which represent the similar structure as Lacan stresses in *The Television*.

The principle discourse for Lacan is the discourse of the Master.

The Discourse of the Master: S<sub>1</sub> / \$ → S<sub>2</sub> / *a*

The clockwise and counter-clockwise circular permutation of the first and the other three elements create the following structures of discourse:

The Discourse of the University: S<sub>2</sub> / S<sub>1</sub> → *a* / \$

The Discourse of the Hysteric: \$ / *a* → S<sub>1</sub> / S<sub>2</sub>

The Discourse of the Analyst: *a* / S<sub>2</sub> → \$ / S<sub>1</sub>

With the application of those elements, their positions on the top and bottom and the left and the right of the equation, it is easy to identify the cataloguing of each of the above discourses. The discourse of the university, for example, clearly shows that the subject's identity is determined by the preoccupation of the subject with the knowledge, S<sub>2</sub>. The right-hand side of the equation reveals the repressed or the latent factors in a subject. In this case, the knowledge function as the object *a* or the object cause of the subject's desire. By the same

token, within the discourse of the hysteric, the barred subject is under the control of the master signifier where the repressed part of the subject unfolds the object *a* in relation to the unconscious knowledge, as Lacan says in *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* says, “At the level of the hysteric’s discourse it is clear that we see this dominant appear in the form of a symptom. It is around the symptom that the hysteric’s discourse is situated and ordered,” (Lacan, 2007, 43). In the interchange between the subjects of discourse, there is always a desire to dominate the other. As the above formulas shows, the master wants to dominate everyone, the scientist dominates the knowledge, the hysteric dominate the master signifier, and so forth.

The determiner of the categories of the discourses is the agent that is driven by its desire that at the same time determines its truth. This position is taken by the master signifier in the discourse of the master who is driven by his desire which is knowledge and its truth is the barred subject. In the university discourse this position is taken by the knowledge, which its truth is the master signifier. In the discourse of the hysteric, the barred and divided subject holds the top position, the truth of which is the object *a*—the cause of desire. In the discourse of the analyst, the object *a*, holds that position. In analysis, the analyst becomes the object of desire for the analysand through the mechanism of transference. The position of object *a* is also important, because this position indicates the production of the surplus enjoyment in each discourse. In fact, each position that determines the dominance of a discourse is the object of desire. S1 is the object of desire in the discourse of the master, S2 is the object of desire in the discourse of the university, the split subject, \$ is the object of desire in the discourse of the hysteric and the discourse of the analyst brings the object *a* at the dominant position. Lacan argues that he made Freud upside down by reducing it as the object of desire itself. In Lacanian therapy thus, the analyst is involved with the patient as a co-worker. The knowledge produces this surplus enjoyment for a scientist or an academic, whereas for a hysteric the symptom of the divided and alienated self produces that enjoyment. Those who are exercising power on others are in those in the position of power who always find their enjoyment by identifying with the master signifier. The master would be obsessed with having the power and the knowledge would have no significance in his ego, “the master is unconcerned with knowledge: as long as everything works, as long as his or her power is maintained or grows, all is well. He or she has no interest in knowing how or why thing work,” (Fink, 1998, 31). The discourse of the master the originary discourse from which the other three and even more discourses could be drawn. The power and its possession produce its signature in language which for Lacan produces the *jouissance* for the master in order to mask the alienation and split of the subject. Put it simply, each speaker of the language as an agent (the subject of discourse) has his/her own *epithet ornantia* as the sign of the categories of his/her discourse.

As said above, it is worthwhile to emphasize that for Lacan the central discourse is the master discourse and the other three discourses may be made from this discourse by revolving each element one quarter of a turn. We may generate many other discourses by changing the order of the elements in the above generating structure: *The agent / truth* → *the Other / production, loss*. At the core of Lacan’s logic of the four discourse lies the towering position of the agent, which rules the upper right position in each quadruped schema. Moreover, each matheme is linked with each other and on top of that their nature is basically contingent because each discourse takes its shape from the repositioning of the above four elements.

Lacan’s theory of four discourse is tremendously important for social and cultural studies. It maps out the function and work of discourses in a given society and culture where knowingly

or unknowingly we subscribe to a particular discourse in accordance with the demands of our identity. Lacan holds discourse responsible for social relationship on the ground of language, as he emphasizes, “I can say until I’m blue in the face that the notion of discourse should be taken as a social link (*lien social*), founded on language, and thus seems not unrelated to what is specified in linguistics as grammar.” (Lacan, 1991, 17). Lacan, in fact shows us the way to find out the internal logic upon which the socio-cultural system regulates itself. According to Lacan the scientific discourse began in the Thirteenth century and the capitalist bureaucracy followed the discourse of the master in terms of the discourse of the university in modern times. As a whole, Lacan theory shows the interchange between psychological and social changes, “Lacan’s schema of discourse offers a means not only of gauging the psychological and social effects of particular texts and discourse but also of calculating how to intervene in these discourses in order to produce psychological and social change.” (Bracher, 1994b, 5)

To put it in a nutshell, each discourse implies a signifying process with a production which is the object *a*, the object of desire, a surplus enjoyment, and in the meantime a representation of the lost object and lack in both the subject and the Other. Lacan’s theory is also relevant to literary criticism where we can determine social relations to which a literary work produces discourses. Each speech act is engulfed in its own unique kind of enjoyment and effect, which is determined by relevant kind of discourse. A dedicated academic would use knowledge as the source of his enjoyment and a hysteric would enjoy by the persistence of her/his symptom. The theory of discourse thus shows us different subjects and their way of enjoyment. The dominant position held in a given discourse reveals as a mark of the fetishized object and its relation to a unique way of enjoyment. Each discourse conditions the positions in language by showing the subject, his/her speech act, behaviour, feelings, action, and so forth. In each discourse, the subject functions as the object of the other desire. The master generates ideals and their master signifiers such as God, country, nation, ideology and so on that subjects would even die for them. The frameworks that Lacan’s theory of four discourses signals social bonds such as governing, education, questioning (the discourse of the hysteric, and revolutionizing (the discourse of the analyst). Žizek summarizes the four discourses in terms of the master and his ideal. The master determines the ideal the university teach the ideal and the knowledge around it, the hysteric questions that ideal and the analyst finds the gap between the ideal and the questioning. According to Lacan, the master signifier has weakened in modern time and the ideal is changed from a person to a collective ideal.

Finally, a word of caution. Lacan’s use of mathematics is symbolic in his theory of four discourse and elsewhere has nothing to do with developing anything mathematical. Some Lacanian defines Lacanian concepts on the basis of mathematical arguments. They make Lacan’s theory of four discourse very difficult when they superimpose mathematical logic on each of the above schema. Several years ago, at a university in New Zealand, I noticed an Anglo Lacanian in a conference who had cast a spell on his eight-member audience by playing with the formulas of four discourse as though he was at worse a street magician and at best a high school math teacher. We should always be careful when describing Lacanian theories in terms of mathematics. This means that Lacan’s theory precisely explains the effects of the ideologies upon the production of discourses and the different position the subjects might hold in given culture and society. The different position of the subject also unravels the inconsistency of Marxist theory of the unified and universal forms of social discourses as well. At the heart of each discourse the choice of the subject is determined by the subject’s desire.

In this seminar, our friend and member, Christopher Lamberton who writes his thesis on Lacan's theory of the four discourses would give us his insight and comments in his presentation. Please select your reading from the following bibliography.

—Dr Ehsan Azari Stanizai

## Notes:

Bracher, Mark, (1994a), "On the psychological and Social Functions of Language: *Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses*," *Lacanian Theory of discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, edit. Mark Bracher et al. New York University Press. NY.

—(1994b), "Introduction: The Real and the subject of Discourse," *Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses*," *Lacanian Theory of discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, edit. Mark Bracher et al. New York University Press. NY.

Fink, Bruce, (1998), "Master Signifier and the Four Discourses," *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, edit. Dany Nobus, Rebus Press, London.

Lacan, Jacques, (1991), *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limit of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, trans. Bruce Fink, WW Norton & Company, London.

—(2007), *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg, W W Norton & Company, New York.