Date: Wednesday 18 July 2018
Time: 6-8 pm
Location: Tutorial Room, No.3, NIDA, 215 Anzac Parade

■ *The July seminar is designed to those members who still seem to be perplexed with Lacan and wrestling to make sense of his basic ideas.*

The Function of Saussurian Linguistics in Lacanian Psychoanalysis

The linguistic revolution of Swiss thinker, Ferdinand de Saussure reordered the ground of the linguistic science whose methodological framework was traditionally shaped by grammarians and philologists. Saussure redefined language as a system of signs that remains within an arbitrary relationship with their basic components, namely the signifiers (acoustic sound or written grapheme) and the signified (concept and meaning). This arbitrariness doesn't imply that each word in language is the name given to a specific idea or an object, like a nomenclature of herbs for example. For a single 'signified' there might be numerous signifiers in different language. Saussure criticizes the traditional study of language where it was seen as a system of communication, a representational system of human thoughts, and a scheme for a set of rules for the correct usage of language. The implications of Saussurean ground- breaking thoughts were first felt in the 1960s within the Parisian circle of intellectuals in all disciplines of the humanities and social science in the wake of the decline of Sartre's existentialism. Saussurean structuralist linguistic soon became the ground for most of the contemporary structuralist and poststructuralist theories. Both school of thought showed interest in the interrelationship, difference, playfulness of the units or signs, and their underlying structure. The underlying structure in a linguistic system, according to Saussure, is organised and appropriated by the human mind. This means that all individual experiences in a given society are controlled by socio-linguistic, psychological, and culturally fixed structures. This proposition provides the point of departure for Lacan's theories as many other works of his contemporary theorists. This notion confirms that the words and mind are working together in the production of discourse. The meaning of signs and word has to be drawn from the relations between signs in a given signifying system constituted by signs. In other words, a sign doesn't have a definitive and pre-existing meaning for its meaning is determined by the place and the differences it has with other signs in the relevant linguistic system. For example, the signifier water, the signifying fragment of the sign, is *Ap* in Sanskrit, *Uba* in Pashtu, *Wasser* in German, *eau* in French, *acqua* in Italian, and *vada* in Russian and so on. Too many signifiers for one signified.

We may summarize in a nutshell the key concepts of the Saussure's theory of language, which have been outlined in his posthumous ingenious work, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). These concepts are of crucial importance for the understanding of the linguistic foundation of Lacanian psychoanalysis:

1. The basic linguistic unit is a sign which can never be free from an arbitrary relationship from a mental concept or signified: This indicates that any word or sign in every language has two parts; the part that signifies and the part that is signified. There is no logical imperative behind this relationship. For example, the pen we use for writing is composed of the signifier 'PEN' and the mental image of the tool that we use. Separation of the signifier from its signified seems to be impossible unless the association of the sign with the other signs in the system is abolished. Such abolition would distract a word or sign from its sense, for it would be reduced to a non-sensical sound. In Saussure's sense, each acoustic sound must be able to have a conceptual aspect. However, the arbitrariness loses its effect when we deal with onomatopoeia, for it represents signifiers, which are made from the sound of what they signify. For examples cuckoo, bloop, splash and so on. Thus, language is a system of differences, each word or sign finds meaning in its place and role in the system of signs, like the identity of a single train in the network of a train system is always a number, which is not driven from the identity of each train such as, colour, brand, age, etc. The identity of a train is always the time of its arrival or departure in the network of a certain train station. Likewise, the identity of a Nike hat is not in its intrinsic quality but the significance that the hat carries in a cultural system from a difference from other hats. Therefore, in a structuralist analysis, every behaviour, production, institutions, a personality or any other cultural phenomena find meaning in its underlying network of relations and their role and place within a given system.

2. The linguistic system or the language as a whole has two main parts, namely, *langue* and *paraole*: The first refers to the whole and abstract system of any given language, its grammatical and sound system; and the later denotes practical speech or the individual use of a langue by means of selection and combination of codes and elements (signs). Furthermore, *La Langue* is a historical and collective construction by a given society and culture. The speakers of a language use *langue* as a set of roles in order to create a meaningful utterance. Saussure gives the example of a chess-game to differentiate these two aspects of language. The fixed set of rules of a chess-game are like the abstract part, *langue* and the endless possibilities of performance in a game are the *parole*. In French theory, especially Barthes, a structure is defined in terms of *langue* as a constituting system of signs. In this context, for Barthes a literary text, a narrative in mythology, or any other cultural phenomenon, find meaning within their relevant systems of signs.

> There are numerous sign systems in our world, from the Highway Code to architectural design, from the clothes we wear to the food we eat. Everything in society is a sign in this sense and thus belongs to a system which, Saussure argues, can be studied like the system of language. (Allen, 2003, 41)

3. Synchronic and diachronic approach to the study of language: A study is synchronic, when we examine language beyond time and history. On the other hand, it is diachronic, when we study a linguistic system according to its historical and time-bound evolution. Saussure prioritizes synchronic dimension in the study of a language and gives little or no significance to the diachronic facet. In this, Saussure undermines the traditional philology, which its focus was often fixed on the historical development and the etymological aspects of words.

4. Two axes of language, the syntagmatic (horizontal and metonymic) and the paradigmatic (vertical and metaphoric): The syntagmatic axis means that each word

has different grammatical role to play in a meaningful sentence. Our brain combines words (written or spoken) in order to our sentence make sense.

Even though Lacan altered and subverted nearly all concept in Saussurean structuralist linguistics, he accepts Saussure's great influence in the articulating of his every key notion. Lacan often comment on the implication of the lack of structuralist linguistic in Freud's theories. In the meantime, Lacan recalibrated Saussure's legacy in order to structure and back up his own theories. He "spends a long time creating from Saussurean raw materials a linguistics fit for psychoanalysis to espouse, and this involves casting Saussure in a role that may literal-minded readers of the *Course* will find objectionable." (Bowie, 1991, 62-63)

In each page of his text, Freud wrestles with traditional linguistics to articulate his theories, For Lacan like Heidegger a man is born and living in language. His psychoanalysis begins and ends with language as he himself once stated,

> The origin of my teaching is very simple. It has always been there because time was born at the same time as what we are talking about. My teaching is in fact quite simply language, and absolutely nothing else. (Lacan, 2008, 26)

Lacan inverted the formula or as he favoured the algorithm of sign into S/s (Signifier/signified) and deconstructed its Saussurean arbitrariness. He rejects the idea that a sign, as a linguistic unit, is 'self-contained' and 'self-justifying'. For him the signifier is barred from the signified, a sign is that which represents 'something' for 'someone', and the signifier as representing the subject for another signifier. The signifier constitutes a subject and its desire. The signifier separates the subject from what he was in the mythical *real* and then provide him with chances to articulate his survival in desire. The source of the signifiers is the Other. The word or signifier is knotted with phonemes and letters and its signified doesn't have a fixed meaning but a slippage into another signifier, "for Lacan sounds and images would not be what they are without the signifier, while for Saussure the sound-image has an independent existence from the signifier and is only arbitrarily linked to a word and both constitute the signifier," (Moncayo, 2017, 26).

Lacan's famous dictum, 'the unconscious is structured like language', means that the signifiers of the unconscious in their troubled association with consciousness are ordered in their own signifying system, often articulated in a network of metonymy and metaphor. "This is shown by analysis of the formations of the unconscious: dreams, symptoms, forgetting of names, etc.," (Lemaire, 1977, 7). However, the unconscious language which is basically imaginary cannot be assimilated in the conscious language of a text. The unconscious language therefore would be showing itself in the play, ruptures and relations between signifiers. In other words, the imaginary constitution of the unconscious makes the unconscious discourse inaccessible to consciousness. The unconscious discourse is additionally complicated as in its imaginary structure it hides the kernel of the *real*, which is impossible to be accommodate in the signifier. The *real* in Lacanian theoretical parlance is identified with a hole, gap, and anxiety in a given discourse. The *real* will persist in the discourse as symptom or in the rhetorical discordance of a text or speech act. Similarly, a literary text always veils the *real* as defect at its heart, for the text is a 'superstructure' and it is able only to produce the 'semblance' of the primordial loss or lack.

> The real designates the constitutive defect of the structural dimension, whereas reality consists of constructions apt to contain or even conceal real lack…the psychoanalyst can legitimately ask what the

relation is between the activity of writing and the process constitutive of the unconscious, which is the recording or inscription of unconscious memory trace comes from consideration of the concern with permanence that lies at the root of every text. (Laclaire, 1999, 320-321)

As hinted above, Lacan uses the structure of metaphor as a symbolic representation of the symptom in which one signifier is replaced by the other and the metonymy as the way desire is originated and continues to function. In the metonymic structure one signifier is linked to the other in a combinatory mode indefinitely. A Symptom by way of its signification insists and repeats itself whereas desire is referred to a process of infinite extension. We reach to the bottom of the symptom once we empty it from whatever that is related to language. Thus, textual parameters are part and parcel of the constitution of the subject. Lacan's emphasis on the text and the signifier stems from the fact that a subject cannot exist outside of language and language is a means by which a subject reproduces infinitely its own desire which is immersed in the loss and lack of the irredeemable object. Desire separates the subject from the lost object and always remains beyond the grasp of the signifiers and signs. Thanks to the poetic function of the language, which gives man's desire, 'its symbolic mediation'. Lacan emphasizes in *The Rome Discourse*, that the power of the word is a 'gift' by which man can discern the effect of the reality the word carries and "it is by his [subject's] continued act that he maintains," desire (Lacan, 1981,86). Lacan ends *RD* with an inspiring anecdote from the Upanishad by which he wants to teach us how the signifiers are emanating from the field of the Other and how we obtain our signifiers from that source. The anecdote imparts that, by means of the gift of the words, we achieve self-control, understand devotion, and get to be compassionate:

> *When the Devas [Gods], the men, and the Asuras [members of Hindu Divine to be evil] were ending their novitiate with Prajapati [God of animals and protector of the phallus who is in close communication with nature], so we read in the second Brahmana [commentary on sacrificial ritual] of the fifth lesson of the Bhrad-aranyaka Upanishad, the address to this prayer: "Speak to us."*
> *"Da," said Prajapati, god of thunder. "Have you understood me?" And the Devas answered and said: "Thou has said to us: Damyata, master yourselves"—the sacred text meaning that the powers above submit to the law of the Word.*
> *"Da," said Prajapati, god of thunder. "Have you understood me?"*
> *And the men answered and said: "Though has said to us: Datta, give"—the sacred text meaning that men recognize each other by the gift of the Word.*
> *"Da," said Prajapati, god of thunder. "Have you understood me?"*
> *And the Asuras answered and said: "Thou has said to us: Dayadhvam, be merciful"—the sacred text meaning that the powers below resound to the invocation of the Word.*
> *That, continues the text, is what the divine voice caused to be heard in the thunder: Submission, gift, grace. Da da da [thunder speaks].*
> *For Prajapati replies to all: "You have understood me." (Ibid, 86-87)*

In conclusion, Lacan broadly used Saussure's theory, but his interest is focused mainly on what linguistic or semiotics offer psychoanalysis. He uses and synthesizes structuralist linguistics like mathematics and topology largely to advance and formalize his own theories. Lacan was also influenced by Jakobson's semiology and Levi Strasse's structuralist anthropology.

In this seminar, we will discuss and clarify the following Lacanian basic concepts:

- Sign
- Signifier
- Signified
- Signification

- Signifying chain
- Structure
- Subject
- The unconscious
- Metaphor
- Metonymy

—Dr Ehsan Azari Stanizai

Notes

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