

The Unconscious is Structured Like a Language : A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: Perhaps the most controversial subject in the Lacanian poststructuralist psychoanalytic theory is his concept of the unconscious. Jacques Lacan has been hailed as a French psychoanalyst whose work has exerted an immense influence upon varied aspects of contemporary theory including feminism and film studies. Lacan has formulated his theories based on Freudian Unconscious and his tripartite model of the mind (id, ego and super-ego with its desires, conflicts and repression. He has elaborated Freud's theories while drawing on perspectives informed by Saussurean Structural Linguistics. This paper is an effort to trace out the concept of the Freudian unconscious and to attempt a critique of Lacan's well known and often quizzical declaration that the unconscious is structured like a language. Apparently this definition runs counter to Freud's idea of the unconscious Lacan's idea of the unconscious cannot be studied and evaluated without the Freudian context.

Keywords: Freud, Condensation, Displacement, Metaphor, Metonymy, Symbolism Dream, Modern Linguistics. Wish Fulfillment.

Two things must be made clear at the outset. First it is different to pin down Lacan's statement to a single meaning. Critics have said that he is a very complex and inscrutable writer. If David Lodge and Nigel Wood "Lacan was a notoriously, willfully difficult writer." (79) To quote Peter Barry "Lacan's own implication of his ideas is often intimidatingly obscure." (105) Jonathan Culler calls Jacques Lacan, renegade French psychoanalyst who set up his own school outside the analytic establishment and led what he presented as a return to Freud". (128) Noam Chomsky took a swipe at Jacques Lacan, "Jacques Lacan I actually know... but quite frankly I thought he was a total charlatan..." Chomsky has repeatedly made this claim about Lacan and other Postmodernists. An alleged text from Chomsky has been circulating on usenet and the Web since 1995 when Chomsky calls Lacan "an amusing character" (*Theory and Theorists*) 2013. Hans Bertens in *Literary Theory: The Basics* avers ; "Lacan's own writings are notoriously difficult. Readers who are not easily discouraged might try "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious..." (169-70).

Secondly, although Lacan was expelled from International Psychoanalytical Association (a kind of World Congress of Freudian analysts in 1964 in Paris), he set up his own breakaway Ecole Freudienne and published a section of his training session under the title *Ecrits* (1966). He insists that he is bringing out the full implication of Freud himself. The seminars for 1964 were published in French in 1973 and in English as the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1977). The organization known as the Freudian School of Paris was disbanded by

Lacan himself in 1980, because of what he claimed was its failure to stick to sufficient strictness to Freudian principles. However, there seems to be direct confrontation between Lacan and Freud. Although some critics have tried to justify the statements on certain grounds like David Lodge, Peter Barry and Hans Bertens. Still it is difficult to reconcile the two authors on this point. For this purpose we will go a little deeper into Freud's concept of the Unconscious. A careful reading of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* reveals that it was Freud who gave a special meaning to the term unconscious which could only be understood in relation to the theory and practice of psychoanalysis as a whole. As Robert Bocock suggests, "Freud took the insights of poets, artists, novelists and religious mystics into the workings of this aspect of human life and made them into propositions formulated as part of a rational, scientific theory of the unconscious" (....16). Contrary to the practice of poets and creative artists who had used their insights aesthetically in their creative art he focused to lay down a theoretical structure of concepts and preposition in order to generate rational, usable knowledge and put it in therapeutic practice. After Freud it was Lacan who emphasized on the significance of language for psychoanalysis, both as a theory and in therapeutic practice. And this may be regarded as his contribution.

Dreams arise out of unconscious and most often it is wish-fulfillment. The human desires, however don't go away, but take refuge in a part of our mind that he is beyond our conscious control and that is known as the unconscious. As we grow up, we may detect that we have to repress desires because they are unacceptable. Freud believes that dreams arise out of the unconscious and most often it is wish fulfillment. He adheres to the view that dreams emanate from the wishes bottled up into the unconscious. Although the conscious mind energetically opts for the border with the unconscious- which is a veritable source of unfulfilled desires and pain the unconscious has ways of getting past its vigilance. It may get manifested in unguarded moments, in slips of the tongue like symbols, figurative metaphors, allusions etc. Freud talks of displacement and condensation. Because the unconscious can hide a repressed desire behind an image that would seem to be harmless and that is what he calls displacement. And it can also project a whole cluster of desires onto an image in a manicure that he calls condensation: a dream figure for example combine characteristics of a member of people one may know: the language that one employs may always have hidden meanings of which one may have no conscious awareness. As Freud elaborates in the *Interpretation of Dreams* "From the unconscious, in fact, my supposition is that a conscious wish can only become a dream-instigator. If it succeeds in awakening an unconscious wish with the same tenor and in obtaining reinforcement from it...these conscious wishes are always on alert, ready at any time to find their way to expression when an opportunity arises for allying themselves with an impulse from the conscious... (Freud Sigmund 91-592). In his chapter on Dream-Work, he explains the works of condensation "The first thing that becomes clear to anyone who compares the dream-content with the dream-thought is that a work of

condensation on a large scale has been carried out.” (312-373) Regarding the work of displacement he suggests, “In making our collection of instances of condensation in dreams, the existence of another relation, probably of no less importance, had already become evident ..And as a corollary, the converse of this assertion can be affirmed: what is clearly the essence of dream-thought need not be represented in the dream at all. The dream is as it were has different elements as its central point...” (340)

Freudian formulation perceives the unconscious as chaotic, primordial, instinctual, pre-verbal. Lacan's dictum 'the unconscious is structured like a language' suggests that psychoanalysis as a discipline must borrow the methods and concepts of modern linguistics. But at the same time he also attempts a critique of modern linguistics from his psychoanalytic point of view.

Lacan begins his key text “The insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious” by foregrounding the intellectual dominance of language studies, He asks: “And how could a psychoanalyst of today not realize that speech is the key to that truth, when his whole experience must find in speech alone its instrument, its context, its material, and even he background noise of its uncertainties. (163)

Elaborating on the meaning of the letter he adds, “What the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language.” (163) He wishes us to rethink on the concept of the unconscious as merely the seat of the instincts, language, therefore becomes central in Lacanian formulation simply because while investigating the unconscious the analyst is always both employing and examining language. That is to say Freudian psychiatry is entirely a verbal science. And the unconscious here is viewed “not as a chaotic mass of desperate material, as might formerly have been thought, but an orderly network, as complex as the structure of a language”. (111) The unconscious, therefore, in Lacan's celebrated dictum, is structured like a language. Now the question arises, how is a language structured? Saussurean language studies explain that meaning in language is a matter of contrasts between words and other words, not between words and things. Meaning, in other words, becomes a network of differences. For there exists a perpetual barrier between signifier (the word) and signified (the referent). Lacan borrows some ideas of linguistics that Freud did not have access to. Saussure shows that a sign is not necessarily something that connects a word a name to a thing but is in fact something which connects a sound or image to a concept. The sound or image is called signifier. The concept is called a signified. Meaning is produced not only by the relationship between the signifier and the signified but also, critically, by the position of the signifiers in relation to other signifiers. When Saussure's theory is put together with Freud's it is not different to see that the movement of signifiers, which generates meanings 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. Lacan exemplifies this built-in separation with a diagram showing two identical lavatory doors, one headed 'Ladies' the other 'Gentlemen'. This intends to suggest that the same signifier may have different signified consequently therefore, "it is easy to see that only the correlation between signifier and signifier provide the standard for all research into signification," (169). This, indeed forces him "to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (170). He seems to demonstrate that words and meanings have a life of their own and keep on overriding and making obscure the supposed simplicities and clarity of external reality. When signifiers relate only to one another, then language is detached from external reality, and becomes an independent realm which is a crucial concept in post-structuralist thought. Metaphor and Metonymy, being two axes of language- substitution and displacement correspond to the working of the unconscious. Metonymy, which carries language along its syntagmatic axis, corresponds to the paradigmatic axis, the axis of substitution and therefore, corresponds to that aspect of condensation whereby different figures can be substituted or are condensed into one through an over determined nodal point. One may compare Freudian distinction to Saussure's formulation:

Signified unconscious - Sr

Signifier unconscious - Sd

Lacan turns the formulation its head

Henceforth, the unconscious, sexuality and fantasy may be perceived as the signifier over the signified. The unconscious is constituted in the same way as our intrinsic ability to speak. Desire is left always unsatisfied and is either displaced from signifier to signifier or it is substituted for- one signifier for another and the whole process makes up a "chain of signifiers" which remains unconscious but which like the unconscious, leaves trace of itself, traces which maybe read. Lacan is at pains to validate that the unconscious is 'linguistic' in structure. He argues that the two 'dream work' mechanism identified by Freud, condensation and displacement Correspond to the basic poles of language identified by the linguist Roman Jakobson, metaphor and metonymy respectively.

In Lacanian view, a dream for instance can be studied in terms of the signifier or manifest recollected content, and a signified or latent meaning which the process of analysis can decode. As Simon Malpas and Paul Wake observe, "while Freud's initial conception of the unconscious called for a study of the way in while this mute domain influences conscious speech, Lacan allowed the unconscious to be studies as a place in which meaning can be generated in its own right"(265). Freudian theory of dreams is re-read as a textual theory. The unconscious, for Freud has been perceived as a realm without syntax or grammar; a realm without temporarily or contradiction. Needless to say that Lecan's thesis contradicts this. According to Freud, all mental states are either ideas (representations) or ideas including affect (energy). Here he also made a distinction between 'word presentations' - the product of the secondary processes of conscious thought and 'thing presentations' - the product of

the unconscious. Many Freudians critics have interpreted that conscious thought is concerned with language while the unconscious is concerned with images and feelings. In Lacanian formulation, the unconscious, is governed by the rules of the signifier as it is language that translates sensory images into structure. As the unconscious can only be known through speech and language, the similar kinds of relationships exist between unconscious elements, signifiers and other forms of language, As Sean Homer elaborates, “the Lacanian unconscious is not an individual unconscious, in the sense that Freud speaks of the unconscious; neither it is a collective unconscious in the sense that Carl Gustave Jung (1875-1961) defines, that is, as a repository or reservoir of mythical images (archetypes) and racial inheritance. The Lacanian unconscious is rather the effect of a trans-individual symbolic order upon the subject” (68). Saussure demonstrated how there was a 'structure'. Within us that governed what we say, Lacan identified that structure as unconscious because to him, the unconscious is not only produced through language but also governed by the rules of language.

Lacan elaborates a concept of the unconscious as being founded on the signifier/signified dyad. The Saussurean bar that separates the realm of the signifier from the realm of the signified provides Lacan with a mind of the line in the mind that sorts our conscious awareness from unconscious processes. That is precisely why one can never move from signifiers in consciousness to the signified unconscious. The unconscious can only be perceived known through signifiers. For Lacan, language suggests not merely verbal speech or written text but any signifying system is based upon differential relations. Which “the unconscious is structured like a language in the sense that it is a signifying process that involved 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 to deciphered”. (Sean Homer 69). Lacan argues how the unconscious operates in a way that resembles how language functions. He found a direct correspondence between Roman Jakobson's structural model of metaphor and metonymy - the twin processes of a Freudian dream work; Condensation and displacement. Condensation refers to a process where two or more signs or images in a dream get combined to form a composite image. And this is invested with the meaning of both of its constitutive elements. For instance in persecutory dreams, the person may dream that he is being subjected to punishment by an unknown authority figure and try to identify - that figure with someone in their life. This figure may not be a single person but a composite or condensation of a number of different figures including parents, employers or partners. Displacement designates the process through which meaning get transferred from one sign to another. One can cite the example of anxiety dreams where the dreamer may get anxious about some very minor incident in their lives, but this functions as simply an act of avoiding or displacing a much more intense problem that they might be facing. By

establishing an analogy between Jacobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy onto Freudian's primary processes Lacan could exemplify how the unconscious was structured like a language. Establishing the link between the unconscious and language, Lacan compares dreams to the game of Charades, "the parlour game in which one is supposed to get the spectators of guess some well known saying or variant of it solely by dumb - show". He further pinpoints, "It is precisely the fact that both the game and the dream run up against a lack of taxematic material for the representation of such logical articulations as causality contradiction, hypothesis etc. that proves they are a form of writing rather than of mine". (*Ecritis* 178) For Lacan, dream-work "follows the law of the signifier". Lacan's interest in the connection between the unconscious and language led him to follow very closely the experiments of the surrealist movement in representing the unconscious in poetry. It is remarkable to note that unlike Freud, Lacan's defines the unconscious at that part of the concrete discourse, in so far as it is transindividual, that is not at the disposal of the subject in re-establishing the continuity of his conscious discourse (*Ecritis* 54). Not only this, he also avers". The unconscious is that chapter of my history that is worked by a black or occupied by a falsehood: it is the censored chapter" (*Ecritis* 55). It can even be discovered in monuments, in archival documents such as childhood memories, semantic evolution, in traditions and in surviving conscious traces (*Ecritis* 55).

Lacan in its Seminar XX, *Encore on Feminine Sexuality*. The limits of Love and Knowledge highlighted the distinction between his own use of the term 'language' and linguistics through the neologism is linguistic. Whereas linguistics is concerned with the formalization of language and knowledge. La Linguistic on the other hand is the side of language that linguistics ignores. It refers to those points in language when meaning fails and breaks down. Fink translates la linguistic as linguistics which indicates and emphasizes the playfulness of the unconscious, and the way "it is always trying to trip the subject up, playing tricks on conscious thought" (Healy 69). On such grounds one may be mistaken to believe that it is in this sense and not in the sense of the formal linguistics (as some critics have argued) that the unconscious is structured like a language. Lacanian unconscious has nothing to do with instinct or primitive knowledge or preparation of thoughts in some underground. It is thinking with words, with thoughts, that escape your vigilance, your state of watchfulness (Lecture of Structure as an). David Lodge in his introduction to the essay, *The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious*, confesses that he does not fully to understand everything in this essay the algebraic formula for metaphor and metonymy. seem designed to mystify and intimidate rather than to shed light. However the main drift of Lacan's discourse is clear(79).

In conclusion one may say that the unconscious is structured in terms of symbols, condensation and displacement. Evidently this does not happen in Language. Words as symbols used in language one very different from the symbols in dream mechanism. When we consider the

Freudian interpretation we cannot escape the conclusion that the unconscious is also regained in tenors of symbols. condensation and displacement. In view of these findings it is difficult to accept the contention that the unconscious is structured like language. Ultimately we are bound to concede that Lacan has presented only an example of casuistry. Otherwise his concept of the unconscious does not agree with the Freudian concept.

Notes :

1. Since Freud various theorists have developed or interrogated his theory of the unconscious. Among them the most widely known is Jacques Lacan who does not impart the term a capital letter. Later on Fredric Jameson's the Political Unconscious makes an effort to rehistoricize Freud's concept of the unconscious and he reassigns the center of the Freudian integrate live system which fames an views as wish fulfillment to history and sociality rather than to the individual subject.
2. Lacan's essay foregrounds two major points: there is no getting outside language and that language is innately figurative not transparent but referential.
3. That the human subject is constituted precisely by the entry into language, and that the Christian humanist idea of an autonomous individual self that transcends the limits of language is fallacy and an illusion were fundamental to Deconstruction Nietzsche's cryptic idiosyncratic and expository style world have been a model for Lacan.

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