

JACQUES LACAN

Sign, Symbol, Imaginary

Sign

We begin at the beginning. Saussure and the Prague Circle invented a linguistics that had nothing in common with previous work that had used the same name. They found its keys in the hands of the Stoics, but what did they do with them?

Saussure and the Prague Circle founded a new linguistics, and they founded it on a cut. This cut is the bar placed between the signifier and the signified. Its purpose is to bring into prominence the difference that constitutes the signifier absolutely. Thus the signifier was discovered to have an autonomous order that recalls the process of crystallization. This is especially evident in the systematization of phonemes which was the first success of the new linguistics.

There are some who have wanted to extend this success to the entire network of the symbolic order. They will admit a meaning only where the network guarantees it; they recognize effects but not contents.

This was the promise created by the cut that inaugurated the new linguistics.

The question was whether or not the signified could be studied scientifically. This was thought to depend on whether the field of the signifier was, by its very material, distinct from any physical field as defined by science.

This necessitated a metaphysical exclusion – this being understood as a *désêtre*, a de-being [resonates with *désastre*, disaster – Tr.]. No signification could henceforth be taken to be self-evident. It was no longer self-evident that light was present during the daytime, for example. Here, however, the Stoics were way ahead of us. And besides, as I have already asked, what was the purpose of this extension of the domain of science?

At the risk of being offensive I shall get right to the point. The term semiotics has undergone several redefinitions; notwithstanding, it refers to any discipline which begins with the sign taken as an object. My own definition of the sign (as

representing something for someone) shows it to be an obstacle to the grasp of the signifier (defined as representing a subject for another signifier).

The sign presupposes the someone to whom one makes a sign of something. The shadow of this someone obscured the entry into linguistics.

Whatever you call this someone, there is no way around the silliness implicit in this notion. The sign of itself, taken as object, permits the someone to appropriate language as though it were a simple tool. The sign makes language the basis of abstraction and the means of discussion. This leads to the “progress” of thought in which the goal is criticism.

I would have to write, not *la chose*, the thing, but *l’achose*, the a-thing, to make you feel with what effect linguistics takes place. [Lacan’s word-play puts us in mind of Hamlet’s “a thing of nothing” – the things linguistics is about are nothings – Tr.].

This does not represent a progress; it is rather a regression. This is what we must fight against – the obscurantist unity which is already consolidated to prepare the a-thing.

No one seems to recognize what is at the centre of this unity. At a time when people gathered up the “signatures of things” for “someone”, at least they did not refer to the elaborate idiocy we have which attaches language to the function of communication.

The recourse to the idea of communication protects the rear lines, if I may say so, from what linguistics bars and leaves to perish. Linguistics uses the notion of communication to cover over the ridiculousness that comes from reapplying its notion *a posteriori*, thus rendering language an occult phenomenon that is supposed to show something telepathic. Even Freud was taken in by this lost soul of thought – the idea that thought is communicated without words. Freud began to clean up this court of miracles but he did not unmask its secret king. So linguistics remains stuck to the thought that words communicate thoughts. This same miracle is invoked to convince you that you telepathize with the same material you use to make a pact. And the hypocrites draw you into their lair with the bait of “dialogue”, and even with the social contracts they expect to come from it. The famous affect is still there hale and hearty to authenticate these effusions of feeling.

All men (who does not know what that is?) are mortal (let us gather round this equality communicable to everyone); and now let us speak of “all”, let us speak together, passing quickly over whatever there is in the heads of the syllogists (not Aristotle, of course) who with one heart (since the time of Aristotle) want to put Socrates into the game in the minor premise. The result will be that death will be administered like everything else, both by and for men. But they will not be on the same side of the telepathic dialogue as it is communicated telegraphically. The syllogism creates a unifying concept of man for which the place of the subject will not cease to be an embarrassment.

Linguistics gets its force from the fact that the subject is marked from the beginning by division. This takes us beyond the pleasantries about communication.

Yes, linguistics has even had enough force to encompass the poet. It tells us that the poet is produced (permit me to translate my friend Jakobson who showed me this) by being eaten by verses. (In French *vers* also may mean worms.) The verses find their own arrangement without any concern for what the poet does or does not know about it. From this it follows that Plato ostracized the poets from his Republic, but also that he showed a lively curiosity in the *Cratylus* for these little animals that appear to him to be words with only care about their heads.

It is clear that formalism was vital in sustaining the first steps of linguistics. It is none the less true that linguistics was “anticipated” by the stumblings of language, or the stumblings of speech.

Freud proposed the following evidence to sustain the ordering he called the unconscious:

- 1 the subject is not one who knows what he is saying;
- 2 something is said by the word the subject cannot remember;
- 3 the subject behaves oddly and believes that his behaviour is his own.

It is not easy to find a place for this subject in the brain, especially when the brain shows itself to be most receptive to this subject when it is asleep – the current state of neurophysiological science does not contradict this.

Someone named Lacan who articulated the order of the unconscious will say that it is what Freud said it was and nothing else. Since Lacan, no one can fail to read Freud this way; and anyone who conducts a psychoanalysis according to Freud ought to regulate or to order his practice according to these agencies. Otherwise he will have chosen the path of ignorance.

Instead of saying that Freud anticipates linguistics, I introduce the following formula: the unconscious is the condition of linguistics.

Without the eruption of the unconscious, linguistics would never have left the dubious atmosphere of the university where, in the name of “human sciences”, it finds itself eclipsed by science. Crowned by Baudouin de Courtenay at Kazan, it would have remained in the university.

But the university has not uttered its last word. It will make this whole story into a dissertation topic: the influence of Freud’s genius on the genius of Ferdinand de Saussure. This will show how the one knew about the other before the advent of radio.

Do we pretend that the university did not always live without this radio which has deafened us so much?

And why would Saussure have recognized any better than Freud himself what Freud anticipated – that is, the Lacanian metaphor and metonymy: places where Saussure *genuit* Jakobson.

If Saussure did not publish the anagrams he deciphered in Saturnian poetry, it was because they would have wreaked havoc in the university. The dishonesty surrounding him did not make him stupid, this in distinction to what happens among analysts.

An analyst, on the contrary, who bathes in the procedures of the university

and who is infatuated by it will be captured by its discourse and will make the blatantly erroneous statement that the unconscious is the condition of language. Those who say this make themselves into authors by disregarding what I told them, what I even incanted to them, which is, that language is the condition of the unconscious.

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