

# The Instance of the Letter in the Japanese Unconscious

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Available in the original French at

<http://www.lacanian.net/Ornicar%20online/Archive%20OD/ornicar/articles/ogw0068.htm> .

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*Ornicar?digital is today publishing a text by Mr. Shin'ya Ogasawara. The first part appeared in "La Lettre mensuelle" n° 145, in January 1996. Ornicar? digital received the second part a few days ago. We have chosen to publish them together, since the same question is pursued and developed in both parts. We hope that the clinical approach chosen by this text will allow a re-opening of the debate on "the instance of the letter" and its relations with the written.*

## "Are the Japanese Unanalyzable?"

It is a known fact: Lacan says that the Japanese are unanalyzable, that they have no need for psychoanalysis, that they are at the limit of analyzability. Why? Because, Lacan says, in the Japanese language there is the "on-yomi" and the "kun-yomi." How are we to explain this verdict of Lacan?

First, what are the "on-yomi" and the "kun-yomi"? These are two ways of reading ("yomi" means "reading") a Chinese character in Japanese. The "on-yomi" of a Chinese character owes to the Chinese phoneme of this character, and thus means nothing in the Japanese language, while the "kun-yomi" of this same character, which is a historically fixed Japanese translation, tells us what it means in Japanese. Let us say, then, that the "on-yomi" arises from the ciphering, and that the "kun-yomi" is of the One, even though the deciphering of the "kun-yomi" is addressed to the Other.

In "Lituraterre", Lacan says that in Japan, too, "the subject is divided, as everywhere, by language, but one of its registers can be satisfied by reference to writing, and the other by speech" ("Ornicar?", n° 41, p. 12).

Thus we see that the deciphering of the "kun-yomi" is addressed to the Other as speech, while the ciphering of the "on-yomi" is not addressed to the Other, is of the One, as letter, as symptom.

For all speaking beings there are these two modes of satisfaction, the one being from the symptom, the other from speech. The one can be either pre-analytic or post-analytic; the other arises from the artifice of analytic discourse. Would it not be because these two modes of satisfaction are insured for every speaking being that Lacan says "the subject is happy-go-lucky (*heureux*)" ("Télévision", p. 40), and not just the Japanese subject?

If Lacan says that the Japanese have no need of psychoanalysis, it is because he thinks that, given that in the Japanese language there is an already established correspondence between the register of the "on-yomi" and that of the "kun-yomi," there is an automatic translation from the register of the letter of the "on-yomi" to that of the speech of the "kun-yomi"--which is to say there is a deciphering that dispenses with the artifice of analytic discourse. This is what

Lacan thinks in his *Avis au lecteur japonais*, where he says that "in the Japanese language, the distance of the unconscious from speech--this gap is so risky to open up in other languages--is tangible." In this sentence, the unconscious is taken as the register of the One, of the letter, of the ciphering. And when Lacan in the "Postface" to "Séminaire XI" evokes an image "of rays that trickle as if from so many sluices" (*des rayons qui ruissellent d'autant de vannes*), these sluices would designate the "on-yomi" Chinese characters that encrust Japanese sentences, and where, thanks to the automatic deciphering, one could pass with out any help from the register of the letter to that of speech.

Only, this idea of Lacan about the Japanese language is a theoretical model constructed by him as a limit-case of "psychoanalyzability." If the Japanese language attracts his attention, it is because he thinks, as he says in *Avis au lecteur japonais*, that "not everyone has the good fortune of speaking Chinese in his language," which is to say that whoever speaks Japanese speaks another language at the same time without knowing it: that there, clear for all to see (*à ciel ouvert*) is a "that speaks (*ça parle*) another language." In the Japanese language the duplicity of the register of language is manifest as such, in the form of the duplicity of the "on-yomi" and the "kun-yomi": a duplicity "so risky to open up" in other languages and that was only brought to light by the Freudian discovery of the unconscious, and a duplicity on which Lacan never stopped insisting--as is indicated by the two chains of the graph of desire, his opposition of letter to speech, and his notions of ciphering and deciphering. Lacan's theoretical construction consists of superimposing the duplicity of the register of the "on-yomi" and the "kun-yomi" on the more general duplicity of the register of language. And this superimposition is a theoretical fiction. In the current clinic of neurosis in Japan, since the symptom remains opaque to the subject, the deciphering is not at all automatic. It is useful to cite here Jacques-Alain Miller's preface to *Joyce avec Lacan*: "If the unconscious is structured like a language, it is not to begin with the discourse of the Other; it only becomes so by the artifice of the analytic experience. There where it was an autistic *jouissance* (of the One), analysis brings in the effects of the signified: it operates on the symptom in introducing there a special effect of signification, called the subject supposed to know."

To demonstrate that in the Japanese language too a signifying determination operates on the subject, I will present a little clinical *vignette*. A young woman came to see me because of her depression, which was serious and long-lasting. She is an intelligent woman who, having completed her studies in economics in a very well-known private university, found an job in a large corporation that allowed her to claim a position high up on the ladder. She then fell in love with a married man working in the same firm. Their relationship had to remain secret, but ultimately the man betrayed her. Driven to desperation, she quit her job. It was at this moment that she had her nose operated on by a plastic surgeon, so it would be more "raised." Since even before this rhinoplasty she was not at all pug-nosed, the operation gave her a nose a bit resembling that of Cyrano de Bergerac. At the time she was nonetheless satisfied with the result, but after a few years, perceiving that her nose had become an object of ridicule, she had another operation. When I interrogated her on her motivation for her first rhinoplasty, she did not have much to say. It was only after several sessions that I was able to catch on the wing the sentence: "My parents were always proud of me." To explain the scansion I made of this sentence, a translation is necessary: this "to be proud" is said in Japanese as "to have a raised nose." Her parents, who did not have a university education, were always very proud of the intelligence of their daughter and hoped that she would have remarkable social success, which "would raise

their noses" still more. And it was exactly at the moment of her social set-back that she accomplished to the letter, in her symptom, this desire of the Other to "have a raised nose."

To conclude, let us recall that in his 1949 article on "The Mirror Stage," Lacan presents the end of analysis as the ecstatic limit of the "You are that." This "You are that" (*Tu es cela*) is the French translation of the "Upanishadic 'tat tvam asi'" which means that the "atman" (the real of the subject) and the "brahman" (the real of the universe) are the same thing, which evokes for us the topology of *extimité*. We find this "tat tvam asi" again the 1958 Lacanian text "True and False Psychoanalysis." Does this mean that the "Upanishadic" formula for truth is the final end of psychoanalytic interpretation? Certainly not. If psychoanalysis consisted of the Other revealing to the subject such a formula, it would be reduced to the Tantric practice of the "mantra," which is an enigmatic and esoteric formula symbolizing the ultimate truth of the "atman" and the "brahman." In the '50's, Lacan wanted the phallus to be something like a "mantra" of *jouissance*. But by the '70's he takes back the value he wanted to accord the phallus, inasmuch it is only a *semblant*.

Psychoanalytic interpretation consists of reading in the ciphering of the unconscious the mode of *jouissance* by which the subject is seized. This reading is supported by the supposition that the speech of the Other would contain the key freeing the subject from the trap of his *jouissance*. But since the Other does not exist, its speech is not wholly accomplished (*toute faite*); it is only ever supposed and expected. In the transference, the psychoanalyst does not answer the subject, because the answer of the analyst only reinforces the expectation of subject as to the speech of the Other. On the contrary, the analyst leads the subject to the work of reading the unconscious--this is what the Freudian term "durcharbeiten" means.

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## **An Example of the Instance of the Letter in the Japanese Unconscious**

An obsessional patient reported the following dream: NAKAZAWA Shin'itchi gives a seminar on psychoanalysis.

NAKAZAWA Shin'itchi is an anthropologist specializing in religions. He is an intellectual more or less publicly known in Japan, himself believing in and practicing Tibetan Buddhism, and who had become, at the moment when this patient reported this dream, the object of media criticism for imprudently pleading the case of a dangerous and anti-social sect.

This dream is the last of a series of three, which succeeded one another on the same night. In the first two, the analyst appeared in a flattering light. We can easily read in the third a criticism of the analyst. Because of this critical thought, the name of the anthropologist NAKAZAWA Shin'itchi is substituted for the name of the analyst OGASAWARA Shin'ya.

But then, how is this substitution made? When these two names are written in Chinese characters ("kanji," ideograms), as they ordinarily are in the Japanese language, they have nothing in common. But when they are written in Japanese letters ("hiragana," phonetic characters), we perceive that they have five letters in common: KA (GA), SA (ZA), WA, SHI and N. We must add a note: the phoneme GA is written with the letter KA and a little auxiliary sign of sonority, the ZA with the letter SA and the same sign of sonority, and, as for N, there is an exceptional "hiragana" for this consonant.

We can therefore conclude that in the Japanese unconscious the instance of the letter is made in "hiranganas," and that, here, the auxiliary sign of sonority does not count. In psychoanalytic practice in Japanese, it is not a question of the "kun-yomi" or of the "on-yomi,"

since these are two fashions of reading Chinese characters in the Japanese language. It is a question of reading the Japanese unconscious in a Japanese *lalangue* only written in "hiraganas." The signifier functions in Japanese also. The Japanese are far from being the limit-case of analyzability.