

# The Return of the Repressed Anticipation and the Logic of the Signifier

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## Abstract

In his *Ecrits*, Lacan discusses the determination of human speech. In his commentary on Poe's 'The purloined letter' he tries to show that the sequence of signifiers is not arbitrary but governed by an internal logic. In 'Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir' he tries to show how this chain of signifiers is constituted in a double movement: on the one hand there is the linear succession of signifiers, on the other hand there is an anticipatory movement. We would like to combine these two lines of thought and illustrate this double determination with Freud's case study of the Ratman.

**Keywords:** Anticipation, Unconscious, Repression, Signifier, Organization.

## 1 Introduction

Freud has always considered the psychical apparatus as an information processing or a representational system. According to Freud it receives sensory data from the sense organs or internal information regarding the bodily needs (Koukkou & Bohleber, 1992: 139-140). These data are organized in different ways and may lead to motor actions. The psychical apparatus contains a variety of different kinds of information; incoming information gets encoded in different ways. Together they contain a model or a representation of the outside world, of the own body and of the interaction between the body and the environment. The psychical apparatus thus contains data that refer to the world in different ways. We could take Pavlov's dog as an example. The sound of the bell is associated with the presence of food on the basis of their contingency in time. The dog has created an elementary model of a certain aspect of reality. The sound of the bell has come to represent the presence of food for the dog; the sound of the bell refers to the presence of food. In the case of humans, Freud notices that one specific way of encoding information, of representing has a privileged position. These are the word presentations or human language.

The activity of this psychical apparatus can be conscious or remain unconscious. In his 1915 essay on the unconscious, Freud distinguishes between two different ways in which this concept can be used (Freud, 1915e: 172-173). On the one hand we can use the concept of the unconscious in a descriptive way. It refers to psychic processes or representations that are currently unconscious but can become conscious without great difficulty. For example, I might not be aware of what I had for breakfast this morning because I wasn't thinking about breakfast. With a little attention I usually remember what it was I had for breakfast. This is what Freud calls the preconscious. At this level we have to situate language and we can now refine what was previously said about language. The privilege of word presentations consists in the fact that they seem to have a much easier access to consciousness than other modes of presentations. Furthermore, a lot of the sensory data that enters the psychical apparatus doesn't need to be conscious in order to get processed. On the other hand we can use the unconscious in a dynamic way and this is the unconscious in a psychoanalytical sense. This refers to psychic processes or representations that are unconscious as the result of a specific operation: repression. We would like to demonstrate that this process is 1) a direct consequence of the specific modality of reference of human language, 2) characterized by an anticipatory movement in the act of speech. In order to do so, we will also have to show that a representation by means of language has an organization that is different from the organization of what it represents.

## **2 The Unconscious and Repression According to Freud**

The unconscious proper consists of the repressed. According to Freud repression is an operation performed on ideas, presentations. Freud explains this mechanism by means of an energetic metaphor. Some presentations are invested with libidinal or psychic energy. This preconscious cathexis makes it possible for these presentations to gain access to consciousness. Repression is the result of a double movement. On the one hand there is a repulsive force originating in consciousness. A certain presentation is denied access to consciousness because of its conflicting nature with other preconscious presentations. Most of the time repression is considered to be the result of this mechanism. Freud, however, explicitly states: "It is a mistake to emphasize only the repulsion which operates from the direction of the conscious upon what is to be repressed; quite as important is the attraction exercised by what was primarily repressed upon everything with which it can establish a connection." (Freud, 1915d : 148). Repression consists thus of two forces: one is pushing a representation, while the other is attracting it. As a result the preconscious cathexis is withdrawn from the presentation and it becomes repressed. It might be important to note that Freud has always considered repression as a cognitive process. The only things that can be repressed are presentations. Emotions, for example cannot be unconscious (Freud, 1915e: 177-179). Freud goes on to say that repression is a process that fails most of the time: the repressed returns into consciousness. However, it returns in a modified way. Once the preconscious cathexis is withdrawn from the presentation that had to be repressed, this



preconscious cathexis is transferred to another presentation that is associated with the repressed presentation. Repression thus only succeeds partially. This return of the repressed is called a symptom because its origin can be traced. The return of the repressed is most easily observed in dreams, Freudian slips, ... These symptoms or substitutive presentations are an indication of the repressed.

### 3 Lacan: The Unconscious and its Relation with the Signifier

Let us turn our attention to Lacan. Following the remarks of Freud on the importance of language, Lacan tried to integrate Freudian psychoanalysis and the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson<sup>1</sup>. An important change in Psychoanalytic theory is the introduction of the signifier. This concept is used instead of Freud's word presentation. The novelty it introduces consists in its mode of reference. We might say that presentations refer to something else. It is in this sense that knowledge can be considered to be a model or a representation of the world. According to Peirce there are different modalities in which a referent can refer to something else (Deacon, 1997: 69-101). The simplest way is by formal resemblance. Peirce calls this iconic reference. My portrait refers to me because it resembles me. A second modality of reference is indexical. This way of referring is always the consequence of a learning process. As an example we might again take Pavlov's dog. The bell is an index of the presence of food. There is no longer a "transparent" relation between the referent and the object it refers to. Concerning these two modes of reference we can note the following: there is a one-to-one correspondence between the referent and the object. The third way of referring is the symbolic one. The referent no longer refers directly to an object but it refers to other symbols. This is the way in which human language refers. When one doesn't understand a word the easiest way to find the meaning is to look for it in the dictionary where one finds a description by means of other words. Lacan uses the word signifier instead of symbol.

The use of this notion of the signifier allows Lacan to shed more light on the notion of the unconscious. In Freudian metapsychology it was still possible to consider the unconscious as some kind of "reservoir of repressed presentations" (Lacan, 1973: 26-27). The unconscious, in this sense, can be considered to be a thingamabob that just happens to be there. Lacan will consider the unconscious as a discourse, as a dynamic process. According to Lacan, the unconscious is structured as a language and is something that causes a discontinuity in our conscious discourse. From this point of view the act of repression (as the act that produces the unconscious) can no longer be considered as some kind of pathogenetic mechanism, but becomes the condition of human speech (Lacan, 1966: 709). We would like to elaborate this point and show how this act of repression consists in part of an anticipatory movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Lacan's most elaborate and explicit attempt to do so is his *L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud* (Lacan, 1966: 493-528).

## 4 The Organization of Human Speech

As stated above, a signifier refers to something by means of referring to another signifier. When we want to know the object to which a signifier refers, we have to take into account the context in which this signifier appears, i.e. the other signifiers of the discourse. The word "tree" refers to different objects in the expression "shoe tree" and "family tree". Language can thus be considered to be a closed system with regard to its object of reference. It has its own organization which is relatively independent of the organization of what it represents. In other words, our models of the world are descriptions of this world that are organized in a different manner. In his "Seminar on the purloined letter" Lacan tries to illustrate this point by means of a game (Lacan, 1966: 44-61). If we flip a coin ten times we can write down the sequence of heads and tails. We get something like this:

+ + + - + + - - + -

This sequence of heads and tails is produced "by accident". It's an arbitrary sequence. We could organize this arbitrary sequence into groups of three and give these new unities a symbol according to following rule:

(+++ , ---) = (1), (+--, -++, +--, --+) = (2), (+-+, -+-) = (3).

In this way we get a new sequence of symbols that represents the succession of the original heads and tails:

+ + + - + + - - + -  
1 2 3 2 2 2 2 3

The point Lacan wants to make is that this second sequence of symbols no longer has an arbitrary organization. For example, (3) can never immediately succeed (1). If we have a continuous succession of (2) that started after (1) it will end in (3) after an impair number of (2) and in one after a pair number (2). The rules governing the second sequence of symbols have nothing to do with the organization of the first sequence that was produced by coincidence. Every symbolic system has its own organization that makes it a relatively autonomous system with regard to what it represents.

Let us turn our attention to human speech as such a closed symbolic system. Nobody will deny that human speech is governed by certain principles that are not at work in reality outside of human speech. The most evident set of rules governing human speech are the grammatical rules. In principle any possible word could succeed any other word. The grammatical rules limit this seemingly unlimited possibility: after a certain category of words only some specific categories can follow. If this is not the case we say it is an incorrect sentence. The effect of the application of these rules is a relatively comprehensible signification. The arbitrary character of these grammatical rules is demonstrated for example by poetry, for which these rules do not necessarily apply.



We can consider these grammatical rules not to be objective ones (different types of syntaxes exist in different language families) but as intersubjective ones: they are shared by a vast amount of people. The idea that is crucial to psychoanalysis is that there are also other rules governing human speech; rules that are not shared and are subjective and particular to each individual. Human speech is also governed by the unconscious. In other words, repression is one of those principles governing human speech (Lacan, 1966: 11). It is important to note that repression, from this point of view, cannot be considered as a once-only operation localized in the past and closing of and making unavailable a certain part of one's life history. Repression becomes an operation performed *in the act of speech itself*, in the spoken discourse of the subject (Lacan, 1975: 294-295). The effect of this operation, of this discontinuity in our conscious discourse is the subject of the unconscious. The unconscious is no longer a "reservoir" of repressed presentations but *is* this discontinuity in our conscious discourse. Of what nature is this discontinuity? We will try to show that it is the locus in human discourse where a signifier lacks and where it is replaced by another signifier (cf. Freud's return of the repressed). Furthermore we would like to demonstrate that this substitution of a signifier is not arbitrary but follows a specific, subjective logic.

## 5 Anticipation, Repression and Human Speech

In his article "Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir" Lacan tries to show how the chain of signifiers that constitutes human speech is the product of a double movement. Two dynamics are at work in human speech: one is progressive and the other is regressive. Because of this specific manner in which a signifier refers to something else, there is an incessant gliding of the signified under the signifier. There are some privileged points in this chain of signifiers for which Lacan uses the notion "*points de captation*" (anchoring points) (Lacan; 1966:805). These are the points in speech where the meaning of the signifiers gets more or less fixed. Lacan compares them with the buttons of the mattress that keep the top and the bottom of the mattress together. On the one hand there is a retroactive movement starting at this point de captation, going back to the start of the chain of signifiers and giving the previously uttered signifiers their meaning. This fixing of meaning is not by reference to an object but by referring back to a symbolic function, to the other signifiers. At the same time however these anchoring points are anticipated in human speech. As Lacan states in "L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud: "Car le signifiant de sa nature anticipe toujours sur le sens en déployant en quelque sorte devant lui sa dimension. Comme il se voit au niveau de la phrase quand elle s'interrompt avant le terme significatif: Jamais je ne ..., Toujours est-il ..., Peut-être encore ..."<sup>2</sup> (Lacan, 1966 : 502) In human speech there is always an anticipatory movement directed towards

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<sup>2</sup> "Because the signifier by its nature always anticipates the meaning by unfolding in some way its dimension ahead of itself. This can be observed at the level of the sentence when it is interrupted before the significant term: Never I will ..., Always is it ..., Perhaps ..." (our translation)



these anchoring points that come to fix the meaning of a sentence. Each signifier is anticipated in the construction of this chain.

This allows us to view the notions of repression and the unconscious from a different angle. We stated earlier that the unconscious, as the result of repression, is the point of discontinuity in human speech. We can now refine this statement. The operation of repression (or the returned of the repressed) consists in fixing a certain meaning other than the one that was consciously intended. It is precisely the fact that an unintended meaning (which may be unclear to the subject itself) arises, that can be considered to be a discontinuity in the conscious discourse. This implies that human speech is organized at different levels. First we have the syntactical organization of grammar. Furthermore there is the semantical organization, the meaning we consciously want to transfer. And third, there is a specific modality of organization of which we are not conscious. Another consequence is that we can now understand what Freud meant with the attraction of what was already repressed. It is precisely the appearance of this other mode of organization of human speech. Psychoanalysis is interested in the way one talks about oneself, the way in which one presents ones life history in a verbal account. As was the case with the flipping of the coins, whatever happens to someone might be mere coincidence. The way in which these events are represented into an autobiography, however, is not arbitrary. We might say that certain signifiers, which act as anchoring points of ones life history, act as the attracting pole that Freud observed in the process of repression. They are the signifiers that appear repeatedly "by accident" in ones autobiography. They function as attractors around which arbitrary events get organized in the autobiographical memory. With Lacan we can see a greater emphasis on the attracting force in repression. Furthermore these crucial signifiers are anticipated in presenting ones life history.

## **6. A Clinical Example: the Ratman**

We will now demonstrate these points in Freud's case study of the Ratman. The Ratman was a young man who consulted Freud because he suffered from a great obsessive fear. He heard a senior officer speaking of a certain torment: a pot containing rats was turned upside down on the buttocks of the victim and they bored their way into the anus of the victim. After having heard the story, the Ratman feared that either his father or a girl he fancied would be subject to this torment. The fact that his father died a couple of years before illustrates the nonsensical character of his fear. Still the idea repeatedly imposed itself on the Ratman, mostly as a threat. He had to do this or that in exactly that way or else his fear would come true. If we consider this episode of his life as an isolated event it is almost impossible to understand. When we consider the obsessive fear in the context of his life history, though not less irrational, we can make some sense of this fear. The crucial part in this fear is the rat; not referring to a rodent but as a signifier. Every crucial episode of his life will soon turn out to be marked by this signifier. The first occurrence of the signifier Rat is related to his infantile sexuality. The Ratman had a governess with whom he took a lot of liberties: "When I got into her



bed I used to uncover her and touch her, and she made no objections." (Freud, 1909d: 161). He remembers that a little later she got married to a *Hofrat*, so that she was a *Frau Hofrat*. The title of *Hofrat* was awarded to prominent physicians, lawyers, university professors, civil servants, etc (Ibid.) Another context in which the signifier *rat* plays a crucial role has to do with his actual love-life. The signifier *rat* now appears in the word *Heiraten* which means to marry. One of the precipitating factors of the Ratman's disease was his doubt between two girls. Shortly before his father got acquainted with his mother he had made advances to a pretty but penniless girl of humble birth. The Ratman's father finally exchanged this girl for his mother who was brought up in a wealthy family. Shortly after his father had died, his mother informed the Ratman that one of her cousins had declared himself ready to let him marry one of his daughters. The Ratman was confronted with the same dilemma as his father: the choice between his love and the wishes of his family. The signifier *rat* will appear in a variety of different contexts and in different meanings in the case study. It will refer to a financial debt of the father due to gambling (*Spielratte*), the money he has to pay for the sessions (*Raten*), ...

We might consider the way in which one talks about oneself as a model of oneself and his interaction with the outside world. The point we wanted to make is that this model is organized at different levels. Every story the Ratman told Freud has a certain coherence that is organized around the meaning of the story. There is one story however, the meaning of which is completely unclear to the Ratman himself: his great obsessive fear. It is precisely at this point that he consulted Freud. This fear can be considered to be the junction at which the other fragments of his life come together around one central word: *Rat*. However we can notice that in all the other "meaningful events" of his life, this same signifier appears. The coherence of the different fragments of his life, which at first glance might seem completely unrelated, is accounted for by their organization around one specific signifier: *Rat*. In the verbal accounts of his life this signifier is always anticipated as the point in which a "new" meaning arises, relating the different parts of his psychological representation to one another.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper we focused on the organization of autobiographical memory as revealed by psychoanalytic treatment and theory. We indicated that, according to Freud, the organization of the model one constructs of oneself is characterized by what he calls repression. Repression is a mechanism characterized by a double movement: on the one hand a presentation is pushed away from consciousness, while on the other hand it is attracted into the unconscious. In his interpretation of the Freudian unconscious, Lacan tried to make use of the findings of structural linguistics. In accordance with the privilege Freud conferred to word presentations with regard to their accessibility for consciousness, repression becomes linked with the specific modality of reference that is characteristic for human language. The result is that the unconscious can no longer be considered to be a reservoir-like entity but becomes something that exists only in the act

of speech. Repression, as the operation that produces the unconscious, can now be considered as an operation that exists only in the act of speech. According to Lacan, the autobiographical model one has about oneself is characterized not only by an organization at the level of meaning, but is also organized at the more formal level of the signifier. It is this second level of organization that psychoanalysis refers to as the unconscious in a dynamic sense. Our focus on Lacan allows us furthermore to consider repression, which is anticipated in the discourse, as the operator of this organization.

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