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Language and Otherness

A Slip of the Other's Tongue

A patient walks into his analyst's office and sits down in the armchair. He looks the analyst right in the eye, picks up the thread where he left off at the end of his last session, and immediately makes a blunder, saying "I know that in my relationship with my father there was a lot of tension, and I think it came from the fact that he was working much too hard at a schnob he couldn't stand and took it out on me." He meant to say "job" but "schnob" came out instead.

Discourse is never one-dimensional. A slip of the tongue immediately reminds us that more than one discourse can use the same mouthpiece at the same time.

Two distinct levels can be identified here: an intentional discourse consisting of what the speaker was *trying* to say or *meant* to say and an unintentional discourse which in this case takes the form of a deformed or garbled word, a kind of conflation of "job," "snob," and perhaps other words as well. The analyst may already know, for example, that the speaker thinks of the eldest child in the family, say, his older brother or sister, as an effete snob and feels that their father doted on that older sibling excessively—to a fault, as far as the patient or analysand (i.e., the person engaged in analyzing him or herself) is concerned. The analysand may also think of the word "schnoz," and recall that as a young child he was afraid of his father's nose, which reminded him of a witch's nose; the word "schmuck" may then also pass through his mind.

This simple example already allows us to distinguish between two different types of discourse or, more simply stated, two different types of talk:[1]

- *ego talk*: everyday talk about what we consciously think and believe about ourselves
- and *some other kind of talk.*

Lacan's Other is, at its most basic level, related to that *other kind of talk.*[2] For we can tentatively assume that there are not only two different kinds of talk, but that they come, roughly speaking, from two different psychological places: the ego (or self) and the Other.

Psychoanalysis begins with the presupposition that that Other kind of talk stems from *an other* which is locatable in some sense; it holds that unintentional words that are spoken, blurted out, mumbled, or garbled come from

some other place, some other agency than the ego. Freud called that Other place the unconscious, and Lacan states in no uncertain terms that "the unconscious is the Other's discourse,"[3] that is, the unconscious consists of those words which come from some other place than ego talk. At this most basic level then, the unconscious is the Other's discourse (table 1.1).

Table 1.1

EGO/SELF DISCOURSE	OTHER DISCOURSE/ THE OTHER'S DISCOURSE
conscious	unconscious
intentional	unintentional

Now how did that Other discourse wind up "inside" of us? We tend to believe that we are in control, and yet at times something extraneous and foreign speaks, as it were, through *our* mouths. From the viewpoint of the self or ego, "I" runs the show: that aspect of us that we call "I" believes that it knows what it thinks and feels, and believes that it knows why it does what it does. The intruding element—that Other kind of talk—is shoved aside, considered random, and thus ultimately of no consequence. People prone to making slips of the tongue often just figure that they get tongue-tied now and then or that their brains simply work faster than their mouths and wind up trying to get two words out of that one slow-working mouth at the same time. While slips of the tongue are recognized in such cases as foreign to the ego or self, their importance is pushed aside. While in most cases a person who just made a slip would probably endorse the following statement, "I just made a random, meaningless goof," Freud's retort would be "The truth has spoken."

Whereas most people attach no particular importance to that Other discourse that breaks through and interrupts ego discourse, psychoanalysts hold that there is method in the seeming madness, an altogether identifiable logic behind those interruptions, in other words, that there is nothing random about them whatsoever. Analysts seek to discover the method in that madness, for it is only by changing the logic that governs those interruptions, only by impacting that Other discourse, that change can come about.

Freud spent a great deal of time in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* unraveling the mechanisms governing what he daringly called "unconscious thought."[4] In his widely read article entitled "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious" (*Écrits*), Lacan pointed out the relationship between Freud's concepts of displacement and condensation typical of dream work and the

linguistic notions of metonymy and metaphor. But Lacan by no means left off there; he went on to seek models for deciphering unconscious mechanisms in the then developing field of cybernetics. In chapter 2, I examine in detail Lacan's juxtaposition of ideas contained in Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Purloined Letter" and ideas inspired by the cybernetics of the 1950s. Lacan's work on Poe has been commented upon by myriad literary critics,[5] but few authors have followed Lacan's own speculations on the workings of the unconscious that stemmed from it.

In this chapter my focus is not so much on how this Other discourse works, but rather on how it got there: How did it get "inside" of us? How did something which seems so extraneous or foreign wind up speaking through *our* mouths?

Lacan accounts for the foreignness as follows: we are born into a world of discourse, a discourse or language that precedes our birth and that will live on after our death. Long before a child is born, a place is prepared for it in its parents' linguistic universe: the parents speak of the child yet to be born, try to select the perfect name for it, prepare a room for it, and begin imagining what their lives will be like with an additional member of the household. The words they use to talk about the child have often been in use for decades, if not centuries, and the parents have generally neither defined nor redefined them despite many years of use. Those words are handed down to them by centuries of tradition: they constitute the Other of language, as Lacan can call it in French (*l'Autre du langage*), but which we may try to render as the linguistic Other, or the Other *as* language.

If we draw a circle and posit that it represents the set of all words in a language, then we can associate it with what Lacan calls the Other (figure 1.1). It is the Other as the collection of all the words and expressions in a language. This is a rather static view, as a language such as English is always evolving, new words being added almost every day and old ones falling into disuse, but as a first gloss it will serve our present purposes well enough.[6]

Figure 1.1

A child is thus born into a preestablished place in its parents' linguistic universe, a space often prepared many months, if not years, before the child sees the light of day. And most children are bound to learn the language spoken by their parents, which is to say that, in order to express their wishes, they are virtually obliged to go beyond the crying stage—a stage in which their

parents must try to guess what it is their children want or need—and try to say what they want *in so many words*, that is, in a way that is comprehensible to their primary caretakers. Their wants are, however, molded in that very process, for the words they are obliged to use are not their own and do not necessarily correspond to their own particular demands: their very desires are cast in the mold of the language or languages they learn (table 1.2).

Table 1.2

NEED —> THE OTHER AS LANGUAGE —> DESIRE

Lacan's view is more radical still in that one cannot even say that a child *knows* what it wants prior to the assimilation of language: when a baby cries, the *meaning* of that act is provided by the parents or caretakers who attempt to name the pain the child seems to be expressing (e.g., "she must be hungry"). There is perhaps a sort of general discomfort, coldness, or pain, but its meaning is imposed, as it were, by the way in which it is interpreted by the child's parents. If a parent responds to its baby's crying with food, the discomfort, coldness, or pain will retroactively be determined as having "meant" hunger, as hunger pangs. One cannot say that the true meaning behind the baby's crying was that it was cold, because meaning is an ulterior product: constantly responding to a baby's cries with food may transform all of its discomforts, coldness, and pain into hunger. Meaning in this situation is thus determined not by the baby but by other people, and on the basis of the language they speak. I'll come back to this point a little further on.

The Other as language is assimilated by most children (autistic children are the most notable exception to the rule) as they attempt to bridge the gap between inarticulate need that can only cry out and be interpreted for better or for worse, and the articulation of desire in socially understandable, if not acceptable, terms. The Other, in this sense, can be seen as an insidious, uninvited intruder that unceremoniously and unpropitiously transforms our wishes; it is, however, at the same time that which enables us to clue each other in to our desires and "communicate."

Since time immemorial, people have expressed nostalgia for a time before the development of language, for a supposed time when *homo sapiens* lived like animals, with no language and thus nothing that could taint or complicate man's needs and wants. Rousseau's glorification and extolment of the virtues of primitive man and his life before the corrupting influence of language is one of the best known nostalgic enterprises.

In such nostalgic views, language is deemed the source of a great many evils. People are considered to be naturally good, loving, and generous, it being language that allows for perfidy, falsehood, lying, treachery, and virtually every other fault with which human beings and hypothetical extraterrestrials have ever been taxed. From such standpoints, language is clearly viewed as

a foreign element inopportunely foisted upon or grafted onto an otherwise wholesome human nature.

Writers like Rousseau have beautifully expressed what Lacan calls man's *alienation in language*. According to Lacanian theory, every human being who learns to speak is thereby alienated from her or himself—for it is language that, while allowing desire to come into being, ties knots therein, and makes us such that we can both want and not want one and the same thing, never be satisfied when we get what we thought we wanted, and so on.

The Other seems then to slip in the back door while children are learning a language that is virtually indispensable to their survival in the world as we know it. Though widely considered innocuous and purely utilitarian in nature, language brings with it a fundamental form of alienation that is part and parcel of learning *one's mother tongue*. The very expression we use to talk about it—"mother tongue"—is indicative of the fact that it is some Other's tongue first, the mOther's tongue, that is, the mOther's language, and in speaking of childhood experience, Lacan often virtually equates the Other with the mother. (Alienation will be discussed at much greater length in chapter 5.)

The Unconscious

Now while this accounts for the foreignness of the mother tongues that we usually consider to be altogether ours, which we have, in other words, tried to make our own as far as possible—and those mother tongues are constitutive of ego discourse, which thus turns out to be far more foreign and alienating than is generally thought (table 1.3)—we have yet to account for that Other discourse which somehow seems still more foreign: the unconscious. We have seen that ego discourse, that discourse we have about ourselves in ordinary conversation with ourselves and other people, is already a lot further from being truly reflective of ourselves than we thought, permeated as it is by this Other presence that is language. Lacan puts that in no uncertain terms: *the self is an other*, the ego is an other.[7]

Table 1.3

EGO/SELF DISCOURSE	OTHER DISCOURSE/ THE OTHER'S DISCOURSE
conscious intentional alienated due to language	unconscious unintentional

Is it any less foreign ultimately to the individual in question than to an outside person, another person? What we think we know about our most intimate selves may in fact really be as far off track as our wildest imaginings about other people. The understanding we have of ourselves may be just as wrongheaded, just as farfetched, as other people's views of us. Others may in fact know us much better than we really know ourselves. The very notion of the self, as some sort of innermost part of a person, seems to break down here; we will return to this point about the foreignness or otherness of the ego, or self as I have been calling it, in chapter 4. Let us try to account here for that "most foreign" of all others: the unconscious.

Lacan states very simply that *the unconscious is language*, meaning that language is that which makes up the unconscious.[8] Freud is mistakenly thought by many people to have held that feelings can be unconscious, whereas for the most part he held that what is repressed is what he called the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen*, commonly translated into English as ideational representatives.[9] On the basis of the German philosophical tradition underlying Freud's work and close study of Freud's texts themselves, Lacan translates it into French as *représentants de la représentation*, representatives of (the) representation, and concludes that these representatives can be equated with what are referred to in linguistics as signifiers.[10]

Thus, according to Lacan's interpretation of Freud, when repression takes place, a word, or some part of a word, "sinks down under," metaphorically speaking.[11] The word does not thereby become inaccessible to consciousness, and it may indeed be a word that a person uses perfectly well in everyday conversation. But by the very fact of being repressed, that word, or some part thereof, begins to take on a new role. It establishes relations with other repressed elements, developing a complex set of connections with them.

As Lacan says over and over again, *the unconscious is structured like a language*;[12] in other words, the same kinds of relationships exist among unconscious elements as exist in any given language among the elements that constitute it. To return to our earlier example: "job" and "snob" are related because they contain a certain number of identical phonemes and letters, the basic building blocks of speech and writing, respectively. Thus they may be associated in the unconscious, even though they are not associated consciously by the individual whose unconscious we are examining. Take the words "conservation" and "conversation." They are anagrams: they contain the same letters, only the order in which they appear being different. While ego discourse may totally neglect the *literal equivalence* of such terms—the fact that they contain the same letters—the unconscious pays attention to details like that in substituting one word for another in dreams and fantasies.

Now by saying the unconscious is structured like a language, Lacan did not assert that the unconscious is structured in exactly the same way as English, say, or some other ancient or modern language, but rather that language, as it

operates at the unconscious level, obeys a kind of grammar, that is, a set of rules that governs the transformation and slippage that goes on therein. The unconscious, for example, has a tendency to break words down into their smallest units—phonemes and letters—and recombine them as it sees fit: to express the ideas of job, snob, schnoz, and schmuck all in the same breath, for instance, as we saw in the word "schnob" above.

As we shall see in the next chapter, the unconscious is nothing but a "chain" of signifying elements, such as words, phonemes, and letters, which "unfolds" in accordance with very precise rules over which the ego or self has no control whatsoever. Rather than being the privileged seat of subjectivity, the unconscious, as understood by Lacan (except in the expression "subject of the unconscious," which we shall come to later), is itself Other, foreign, and unassimilated. Most of us probably tend to think, as did Freud, that the analysand who blurts out "schnob" instead of "job" is revealing his or her true colors: a gripe against a father who paid too much attention to an older sibling and not enough to the analysand, and a wish that it had been otherwise. And yet, while that desire may be considered *truer*, in some sense, than other desires expressed by the analysand in "ego mode" (e.g., "I really want to become a better person"), it may nevertheless be a foreign desire: the Other's desire. The analysand who says "schnob" may go on to say that it was, in fact, his mother who felt that his father was a schmuck and who repeatedly told him that his father was neglecting him; he may come to realize that he stopped himself from loving his father and began resenting him only to please his mother. "I wasn't the one who wanted to reproach him," he may conclude, "she was." In this sense, we can think of the unconscious as expressing, through its irruptions into everyday speech, a desire that is itself foreign and unassimilated.

Insofar as desire inhabits language—and in a Lacanian framework, there is no such thing as desire, strictly speaking, without language—we can say that the unconscious is full of such foreign desires. Many people sense at times that they are working towards something they do not even really want, striving to live up to expectations they do not even endorse, or mouthing goals they know perfectly well they have little if any motivation to achieve. The unconscious is, in that sense, overflowing with *other people's desires*: your parents' desire, perhaps, that you study at such and such a school and pursue such and such a career; your grandparents' desire that you settle down and get married and give them great-grandchildren; or peer pressure that you engage in certain activities that do not really interest you. In such cases, there is a desire that you take to be "your own," and another with which you grapple that seems to pull the strings and at times force you to act but that you do not feel to be altogether your own.

Other people's views and desires flow into us via discourse. In that sense, we can interpret Lacan's statement that the unconscious is the Other's discourse in a very straightforward fashion: *the unconscious is full of other peo-*

ple's talk, other people's conversations, and other people's goals, aspirations, and fantasies (insofar as they are expressed in words).

That talk takes on a sort of independent existence within "our*selves*," as it were. Clear examples of the internalization of the Other's discourse—other people's talk—are found in what is commonly called conscience or guilty conscience, and in what Freud called the superego. Let us imagine, and this a purely fictional account, that Albert Einstein overheard a conversation, which perhaps was not intended for his ears, wherein his father said to his mother, "He'll never amount to anything,"[13] and his mother concurred, saying, "That's right; he's lazy like his father." We can imagine that Albert was not yet even old enough to either understand what all the words meant or divine their sense. Nevertheless, they wound up being stored somewhere and lay dormant for many years, only to be reactivated and plague him relentlessly when he was trying to make headway in high school. The words finally took on meaning and took their toll when he failed math in high school—that part of the story is apparently true—even though he certainly did not lack the ability to grasp the material.

Now we can imagine two different situations. In the first, whenever Albert sat down to take a test, he heard his father's and mother's voices saying, "He'll never amount to anything" and "That's right; he's lazy like his father" and was so distracted, now that he finally understood what all the words meant, that he could never answer any of the questions on the test. In the second situation, none of that talk would be consciously remembered, but it would nevertheless have a similar effect on Albert. In other words, those disparaging remarks would be circulating in his unconscious, working, distracting, and torturing the young Einstein, short-circuiting consciousness. Albert would see the test in front of him on the desk and suddenly find himself in something of a daze and have no idea why. Perhaps he knew the material backwards and forwards five minutes before the test, and yet was suddenly inexplicably incapable of concentrating on anything whatsoever. Thus he unknowingly fulfilled a prophecy he did not even consciously know his father had made, the prediction "He'll never amount to anything." And, irony of ironies, let us suppose that, in this fictional account, his father had in fact been talking about the next door neighbor's son at the time!

Lacan sets out to explain how such situations are possible: the unconscious as a chain of signifying elements which unfolds in accordance with very precise rules (the likes of which will be indicated in the following chapter) constitutes a memory device such that while Albert is unable to remember how many times his father said "No, the boy will never amount to anything," it is remembered *for* "him." He may not remember his father ever having said that about anyone at all, but the chain of signifiers remembers in his stead. The unconscious counts, records, takes it all down, stores it, and can call up that "information" at any time. That's where Lacan's cybernetic analogies come in.[14]

Freud says of unconscious elements that they are indestructible. Is it grey matter that is so constituted that certain neuronal pathways, once established, can never be eradicated? Lacan's answer is that only the symbolic order, through its combinatory rules, has the wherewithal to hold onto snatches of conversation forever.[15]

At this most basic level, then, the Other is that foreign language we must learn to speak which is euphemistically referred to as our "native tongue," but which would be much better termed our "mOther tongue": it is the discourse and desires of others around us insofar as they are internalized. By "internalized" I do not mean to suggest that they become our own; rather, albeit internalized, they remain foreign bodies in a sense. They may very well remain so foreign, so estranged, so cut off from subjectivity that an individual would choose to take his or her life in order to be rid of such a foreign presence. That is obviously an extreme case, but it indicates the overwhelming importance of the Other within oneself.

Foreign Bodies

The Other corresponds here to what goes by the name of structure in the movement known as structuralism. Here I would like to pursue structure insofar as we find it at work in the body, not in the sense of bone structure or the organization involved in the nervous system, but in the sense of that which proves that the body is at the mercy of language, at the mercy of the symbolic order. A former analysand of mine complained of a plethora of psychosomatic symptoms which changed all the time, albeit slowly enough so that each symptom had ample time to get him quite worried and to prompt a visit to his doctor. At one point this analysand heard that a friend of his had had an acute case of appendicitis that came on very suddenly and led to a close call in the emergency room. The analysand asked his spouse which side of the body the appendix was on, and she told him. Some time thereafter, the analysand, strangely enough, began feeling pains on that very side of his body. The pains persisted; the analysand became surer and surer every day that his appendix was soon going to burst and finally decided to go see his doctor. When the analysand showed the doctor where it hurt, the doctor burst out laughing and said, "But the appendix is on the other side: your appendix is on the right, not on the left!" The pain immediately vanished, and the analysand felt obliged to explain that his wife must surely have been mistaken, then, in telling him that the appendix was on the left. He shuffled out of the examining room feeling rather silly.

The point of the story is that knowledge, knowledge as embodied in the words "appendix," "left," and so on, allowed a psychosomatic symptom to develop on a side of the body where even the worst informed of doctors could

divine the error. The body is written with signifiers. If you believe that the appendix is on the left, and by identification with someone else or as part of a wide array of psychosomatic symptoms—which are just as rife nowadays as in nineteenth century Vienna, though they often take different forms—you are bound to come down with appendicitis, it's going to hurt, not in your biological organ, but where you *believe* the organ to be located.

Analysts of Freud's generation often related cases of anesthesia—numbness or lack of all feeling in certain parts of the body—which were in no way, shape, or form regulated by the location of a particular nerve's endings in some part of the body, but which instead clearly obeyed popular notions about where a part of the body, as defined in common speech, started and stopped. Whereas one and the same nerve might flow through all of a person's arm and down to the tip of the fingers, someone might feel nothing at all at one particular point on the arm, or might feel sharp pain (pseudo-neuralgia) at that point, for no apparent physiological reason. It might well turn out that, during some war, the person's father had been shot at that very point in the arm. And we might perfectly well imagine that, as a child, the person had been misinformed concerning which arm the father had been shot in, and that the lack of feeling or sharp pain showed up in the wrong arm!

These anecdotes illustrate the notion that the body is written with signifiers and is thus foreign, Other. Language is "encrusted upon the living," to borrow Bergson's expression. The body is overwritten/overridden by language.

Freud shows us how the polymorphously perverse child's libido is progressively channeled into (thereby creating) specific erogenous zones—oral, anal, and genital—through socialization and toilet training, that is, through verbally expressed demands made on the child by its parents and/or parental figures. The child's body is progressively subordinated to those demands (perhaps never entirely so, but rebellion against them simultaneously demonstrates their centrality), the different parts of the body taking on socially/parentally determined meaning. The body is subdued; "the letter kills"[16] the body. The "living being" (*le vivant*)—our animal nature—dies, language coming to life in its place and living us. The body is rewritten, in a manner of speaking, physiology giving way to the signifier, and our bodily pleasures all come to imply/involve a relationship to the Other.

Our sexual pleasures are thus also intimately tied to the Other. Not necessarily to other "individuals"; indeed, there are many people who sense that they are unable to have intimate relations *with* other people, those other people being little more than peripheral props for their fantasies, scenarios, and so on, or material manifestations of the particular body types that turn them on. Any time we talk about body *types*, *scenarios*, or *fantasies*, we're talking about linguistically structured entities. They may take the form of images in one's mind, but they are at least in part ordered by the signifier, and thus at least potentially signifying and meaningful. (In later chapters, I will explain at

length why images and the imaginary in general rarely function independently of the symbolic in speaking beings.)

Our very fantasies can be foreign to us, for they are structured by a language which is only tangentially or asymptotically our own, and they may even be someone else's fantasies at the outset: one may find that one has a fantasy which is in fact one's mother's or father's fantasy, and that one does not even know how it wound up knocking around in one's own head. That is one of the things that people find the most alienating: even their fantasies do not seem to be their own.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that they necessarily wind up in one's head through no doing of one's own. It seems to me that there is no such thing as a symptom or fantasy without some subjective involvement, in other words, without the subject being somehow implicated, without the subject somehow having had a hand in it. Bringing an analysand to the point of realizing the part she or he played in the "choice" of her or his symptom is often quite a feat, and indeed at times it seems as if there is no subjective involvement whatsoever in certain symptoms and fantasies prior to analysis; subjectification is only brought about after the fact. This conundrum will be discussed at length in chapters 5 and 6.

One can already begin to distinguish different possible subject positions,[17] that is, the different clinical structures (neurosis, psychosis, and perversion) and their subcategories (e.g., hysteria, obsession, and phobia under neurosis), on the basis of different relations to the Other. Indeed, in Lacan's early work, the subject *is* essentially a relationship to the symbolic order, that is, the stance one adopts with respect to the Other as language or law. But since the Other as elaborated by Lacan has many faces or avatars—

- The Other as language (i.e., as set of all signifiers)
- The Other as demand
- The Other as desire (object *a*)
- The Other as jouissance

—and since demand, desire, and jouissance will not be examined in any depth until parts 2 and 3 of this book, such a schematization is best left aside for now.[18] The different facets of the Other should not be viewed as entirely separate and unrelated, yet their articulation is a complex task not to be undertaken at this stage.

I will turn now to an examination of the functioning of language in the unconscious.

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