

## On linguistry and homophony

Jean-Claude Milner quotes an extraordinary passage from Lacan. It is a passage from “*La troisième*”, which Lacan delivered to the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Freudian School of Paris in Rome in 1974:

It is *lalangue* that makes it possible for us to consider that it is no coincidence that the “*voeu*”, wish, is also “*veut*”, want, the third person [singular] indicative of [the verb] “*vouloir*”, to want—the fact that the “*non*” of denial and the “*nom*” that names is no coincidence either—the fact that “*d’eux*”, (d, apostrophe, e, u, x), them, referring to the people you are talking about, is constructed in the same way as the number *deux*, two, is no coincidence either, and nor is it arbitrary, as Saussure says. What we have to appreciate is that it is the deposit, the alluvion, the petrification that is marked by the way a group handles its unconscious experience.

*Lalangue* is not to be called living [just] because it is in use. It is, rather, the death of the sign it carries. ...

*Lalangue* is made from the *jouissance* of the unconscious. (Lacan 2011, p. 20, my translation)

Jean-Claude Milner speaks of his “resistance”. This resistance, he says, meant he failed to grasp the significance of a crucial development in the final period of Lacan’s work, encapsulated in this passage, around the significance of homophony in language. Milner (1995) divides Lacan’s teaching into three phases of a first classicism, a second classicism and a third phase he calls “deconstruction”. This third phase is the revolutionary moment that commences with *Seminar XX* where Lacan (1998) turns to knots and topology.

Milner’s resistance, he says, prevented him from recognizing that following immediately upon the turn towards the knots and the repudiation of the linguistic turn that had so marked Lacan’s earlier “classical” period, Lacan then makes homophony the cornerstone of his approach to language. For a linguist, two words are homophones when they sound the same but are spelt differently: “blew” and “blue”, “through” and “threw”, “saw” and “sore”. For a linguist, homophones are distinct from homonyms, which occur when two words both sound the same and are spelt the same but have different meanings: “bachelor”, “bank”, “blue”.

As Milner points out, Lacan is not just criticizing Saussure but all linguists and what Lacan (1998, p. 15) calls their “linguistry”—a word formed on the model of “sophistry”, “casuistry”, “chicanery”. Lacan inverts the relationship between linguists and their linguistry. And, as J.-C. Milner says, Lacan here adopts a position diametrically opposed to that of the linguist. Linguists treat homophones and so on as accidents of language, as coming about in a random way; they consider them as occurring by chance, as mere coincidences.

It might seem obvious that the homophony of “blue” (colour) and “blew” is coincidental; it’s a contingent fact about English, just as it is a contingent fact about French that “non”, no, and “nom”, name, are homophones. Well, in response, note two things. First, that every language has these “contingencies”. They are universal contingencies in natural languages; we might say:; individually contingent, collectively universal.

Second, and this is the more important response, it only seems obvious that homophony is an accident of language if we assume, as linguistry does, that the overriding purpose of language

is communication. If we consider that the purpose of language is to communicate, then homophones, homonyms, ambiguities, and so on, become mere inefficiencies of language, and mere contingent inefficiencies. But what if language is not a tool at our disposal for communication but a means of *jouissance*, a way for us to enjoy? What if, moreover, language is a parasite, a foreign entity that has invaded and taken up residence in the human body, thereby disfiguring and distorting it forever? If we do this, then it becomes possible to view homophony as no longer merely accidental but as the means to do something else. It is because of this “for some other purpose” that Lacan differentiates between “*lalangue*”, in one word, and “*la langue*”, written in two. I return to the significance of this distinction below.

I first want to mention what Milner himself calls his “resistance” to recognizing that homophony had become a cornerstone of Lacan’s doctrine. Milner speaks of this resistance as if it were a personal matter. He refers to being underwhelmed by Lacan’s (2016) turn to Joyce—or, since Joyce is a writer of significance, maybe it was Lacan’s approach to Joyce, where he became more Joycean than Joyce himself. Perhaps Milner considered Lacan’s rampant word plays a foolishness. In any case, Milner declares he considered Joyce a dead end and speaks of this resistance as if it were a personal matter.

It seems to me, however, that this resistance is not the resistance of Jean-Claude Milner but the resistance of theory, which is ultimately the resistance of language. Language resists treating homophony in language as anything but accidental in the same way that human thought treats slips of the tongue and pen, cases of forgetting and bungled actions (Freud’s *parapraxes*) as meaningless accidents, or in the same way that dreams are seen as meaningless epiphenomena. Lacan’s claim amounts to asserting that homophony is a formation of the unconscious, along with dreams, witticisms, *parapraxes* and, of course, symptoms.

Furthermore, there is a resistance of theory in another way. Perhaps it would not be too egregious to call it *Lacan’s* resistance. It seems to me that there is at times a gap between Lacan’s official doctrine and what he teaches. At the level of his official doctrine, early in his teaching Lacan declares a very close kinship, if not an identity, between psychoanalysis and linguistics. For instance, Lacan (2017, p. 5) declares that linguistic analysis “has the closest of relationships to analysis as such. They are indistinguishable, even. If we look closely, they are essentially no different from one another.” Lacan’s brilliant insight was to see that the unconscious is comprised of language through and through and this insight produced years of rich contributions to psychoanalytic theory and practice. That the discovery of the linguistic nature of the unconscious was highly productive is not in question. What is in question is the value of Lacan’s allegiance to linguistic theory. And in fact, so many of his specific examples differ markedly from the official doctrine, to the point where nothing of what Lacan describes really fits into the theory or theories of language he officially endorses. The most interesting and important of the linguists Lacan uses is Roman Jakobson, but even here nothing really fits. The theory of metaphor and metonymy, directly inspired by Jakobson’s work on aphasia, never really fits the unconscious operations of condensation and displacement. And this contrasts markedly with Lacan’s (1993, pp. 132–142) intriguing discussion of “the peace of the evening” or his (2017, treatment of the words “*atterré*”, dismayed or distressed, and “*la terre*”, earth, and “*la terreur*”, terror, which fits no textbook of linguistics.

Even Freud's examples prove rebellious to linguistics. To achieve its aim, the unconscious will readily ignore the semantics of the signifier. When "Signorelli" disappears from Freud's consciousness to be replaced by "Boticelli", the unconscious has no scruples about fragmenting the signifier into meaningless parts: /bo/, /elli/, /trafoi/, where /signor/ is the only meaningful part that remains.

And so, when in *Seminar 20, Encore*, Lacan (1998, p. 15) declares, "The fact that I say that the unconscious is structured like a language is not part and parcel of the field of linguistics", what is surprising is not that he repudiates linguistics, but that it took him 15 to 20 years to abandon the official doctrine that was not consistent with the analysis of the language-like structure of the unconscious in the first place.

Have I overstated my case? Possibly. As J.-C. Milner notes, linguistics since Chomsky has focused on explaining what is involved in the production and understanding of linguistic utterances. This is language as performance. And the language that the unconscious is structured like is not Chomskyan, but Jakobsonian.

But even so, the critique of linguistics explicitly mentions Jakobson and so amounts to a total rejection of linguistics and a turn towards something else flagged by the claim about homophony. Why so? It has to do with the turn from a theory of the symptom towards a theory of the sinthome. We owe our appreciation of this turn from symptom to sinthome, as Milner says, to a decade or so of teaching on this issue by J.-A. Miller. Many of Miller's reflections on this occur in the context of a discussion of Joyce.

Following Miller, whose reading of Lacan is always instructive, we can understand the sinthome of the last period of Lacan's teaching as the way in which each person both enjoys, *jouit*, the unconscious and is determined by the unconscious. A sinthome is thus a symptom, but a symptom grasped in its dimension of jouissance. What Lacan came to appreciate was this: insofar as a symptom is susceptible to being psychoanalysed, it is interpretable. Yet, while a symptom may well be a message—this is what Lacan taught in the earlier period of his teaching—it does not consist solely of meaning. The way Lacan characterised this surplus was as the "dimension of the letter", or the "literality" of the symptom. This led Lacan as far back as 1975 to declare that while a symptom is supported by a structure that has the structure of language, it is not articulated purely in a process of speech—such as in the interpretation in analysis—but is "inscribed in a writing process" (2006, p. 371).

In this connection, we can appreciate Lacan's delight in Joyce's "a letter, a litter", for isn't this just how the body enters into the formation of a symptom? As litter, as refuse, and as what has been rejected? We move here from the divided subject, \$, of the early Lacan to what we think of as the speaking body.

There is reference to the letter throughout Lacan's work, and so in Lacan's last phase, the post-*Seminar XX* phase, we find something new that breaks with Lacan's previous teaching, but also the elaboration of something that was there in the background all along, in Lacan's occasional references to the dimension of the letter. Initially, the letter was thought of in a crypto-Saussurian manner as the material support of the relation the subject entertains with the structure that determines the unconscious. We can, albeit retrospectively, regard Lacan's

(2006) remark from 1957 about the inscription of the symptom in a writing process as anticipating the future direction of his teaching.

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