

ON METAPHOR

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We start with Saussure's definition of the linguistic sign as modified by Lacan:

$$\frac{S}{s}$$

This inscription is usually read as “signifier over signified” and indicates the relationship between a *signifier*—some meaningful differential element of language, such as a letter, a word, a sentence—and what it signifies, that is, its *signified*, or meaning.

This is the elementary model of signification, that is, the model for how elements of language mean. But this model isn't sufficient since it implies a simple one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified. If this were the case, language would be strictly a code, a stable set of meanings with an equally stable set of linguistic elements attached to them, and within this fixed system of meaning, we would never be able to make a joke, or be ironic, or write a poem. We'd never be able to generate startling new uses of language. We'd never be able to generate new meanings at all. Language would never change.

So the “signifier over signified” model shows the relation between the two, but it doesn't really account for how that relation comes about. The question remains: How do we determine what any signifier (S) means (s)?

Let's take a word like *fondue*. We assume that it has a meaning:

$$\frac{\text{fondue}}{s}$$

But if I don't know that meaning, if I don't know the signified of the signifier *fondue*, I'll have to ask for a definition. When I do this, I'm placing *fondue* at the level of the signified because I want some definition to indicate to me that *this*—whatever *this* is—means *fondue*.

$$\frac{\text{definition}}{\text{fondue}}$$

If the definition is, let's say, "melted cheese," then that is a new signifier that substitutes for *fondue*, and *fondue* becomes the signified, or meaning:

$$\frac{\text{melted cheese}}{\text{fondue}}$$

This substitution of terms can certainly be called a metaphor, that figure of speech in which one term is substituted for another. A new signifier (S') substitutes for the original one (S) that then "falls" to the level of the signified.

$$\frac{S'}{S}$$

And this is Lacan's basic algorithm for metaphor (*Écrits* 515).

But we can raise an objection here. Wouldn't it be easier to assume that when we encounter some unknown term, we're not asking for a new *signifier*, but really for a meaning, and thus a *signified*? Wouldn't it be easier to assume that instead of a substitution of signifiers, we're really talking about finding the proper definition for a term we don't know?

$$\frac{\text{fondue}}{?} \rightarrow \frac{\text{fondue}}{\text{definition}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{fondue}}{\text{melted cheese}}$$

However much intuitive sense that assumption may make, there are problems with it. For one thing, it returns us immediately to the model of language as a code made up of one-to-one correspondences. Otherwise, how would we know the "proper" definition when we encountered it? Also, the definition actually *is* a signifier, not a signified. When we look up a word in a dictionary, we find more words. And if we don't understand those, we look them up, too, and find more words. Signifiers can only refer to other signifiers, endlessly. In that sense, there is no signified. The only way we can "capture" a signified is to put it into words, that is, precisely, to turn it into signifiers. And that, of course, is the process of analysis as well, taking vague, undefined—yet perhaps powerful—"meanings" or feelings and putting them into words. Thus the Lacanian idea of the signified includes not only meaning, but also *meaningfulness*, our

emotional investment in meaning. And this is why the dead order of language is inadequate to capture meaning—our feelings go beyond the power of language to express them.

Lacan’s assumption, then, is that all language is metaphorical. Lacan frequently insists that “there is no metalanguage” (see, for example, *Écrits* 813). Another way of saying this is that there is no literal level of language. There’s no literal meaning to which we can appeal to determine and guarantee stable meaning.¹

This raises a point that isn’t often emphasized. If we can’t distinguish between literal meaning and metaphorical meaning, then it would seem that metaphor is always reversible. If we ask for the meaning of *fondue*, then the signifier *fondue* drops to the level of the signified while we await some new signifier that would define it.

$$\frac{\text{fondue}}{?} \rightarrow \frac{S'}{\text{fondue}}$$

That new signifier, the definition, stands for *fondue* in such a way that *fondue* means *melted cheese* and *melted cheese* means *fondue*. The two terms are therefore interchangeable.

$$\frac{\text{fondue}}{\text{melted cheese}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{melted cheese}}{\text{fondue}}$$

This observation may seem trivial, but the reversibility of metaphor is actually of some use in interpretation. Consider, for example, *carpe diem* poems such as Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” These seem to be poems aimed at convincing a young woman to give up her virginity using the swift passage of time as an elaborate metaphor or conceit. Yet upon rereading them, one finds that they are actually poems about the swift passage of time using the loss of a young woman’s virginity as a metaphor.

$$\frac{\text{passage of time}}{\text{loss of virginity}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{loss of virginity}}{\text{passage of time}}$$

In spite of its interpretive value, though, the reversibility of metaphor may actually be a stumbling block. It is indeed a

limitation of representing metaphor by the simple algorithm S' over S .²

In fact, the problem of the reversibility of metaphor alerts us to the fact that metaphor is actually not a two-term, but a four-term operation (cf. Lacan's "The Metaphor of the Subject," *Écrits* 889-892). The classical model for metaphor is analogy. Take, for example, a metaphorical statement describing a handshake: "The mayor stretched out his paw to shake my hand." The implied analogy equates the terms *paw* and *hand*:

hand : human :: paw : animal

The structure of an analogy is $A : B :: C : D$. And yet a metaphor does not treat all these terms equally. They do not divide two by two but, as Lacan says, "three against one" (*Écrits* 890). For surely the implication, that the mayor is an animal, appears nowhere in the metaphor.

Or consider another analogy:

professor : field :: lion : jungle

If we use the metaphor, "The professor was a lion in his field," then the latent term is *jungle*. And we could, of course, go on, for this metaphor is based on another, that the lion is king of the jungle, the missing term here being *kingdom*:

king : ? :: lion : jungle

After the deployment of these four terms "three against one" what is produced is not a "proper definition" or an expected signified, but an entirely new signification (s).

We can see this generation of a new signified illustrated in Lacan's most complete version of his formula (as opposed to algorithm) for metaphor:

$$\frac{S}{S'} \cdot \frac{S_2}{x} \rightarrow S \left(\frac{1}{s''} \right)$$

There are several surprising things about this formula. For one, the algorithm has accustomed us to thinking that a new signifier (S') comes to metaphorize the one that has dropped to the

level of the signified (S).

$$\frac{S'}{S}$$

Yet in the expanded formula, S' is located below the bar, and S is on top. Why? The notation S-prime (S') simply means that this signifier is logically second; that is, we assume that any metaphor involves a *second* signifier (S') taking the place of the *first* (S). This is what the simple algorithm represents. But in “real life” there are only the signifiers that appear in the signifying chain, and these are the ones we encounter. And the signifiers that we encounter in the signifying chain—in real life, in real time—are chronologically *first* even if they are logically *second*. In other words, any signifier that we hear or read is already a metaphor, but its metaphorical meaning is latent and would have to be retrieved *secondarily*.

$$\frac{S}{S'}$$

So the formula tells us something about *how* any S signifies. It signifies by referring to another signifier that *could* be retrieved by an act of interpretation, but most often is not.

Next we should note that S' is numbered in its two appearances in Lacan's formula, and S over S' is prior to S' over *x*. This may seem counterintuitive. We might think that in the first instance, S' refers to some unknown *x* until some new metaphor comes along to signify it, or, in fact, to metaphorize it. Then those two appearances of S' in the formula would be “canceled out,” as in the multiplication of fractions and we would be left with S referring to its signified:

$$\text{Incorrect formula: } \frac{S}{S'_2} \cdot \frac{S'_1}{x} \rightarrow \frac{S}{s''}$$

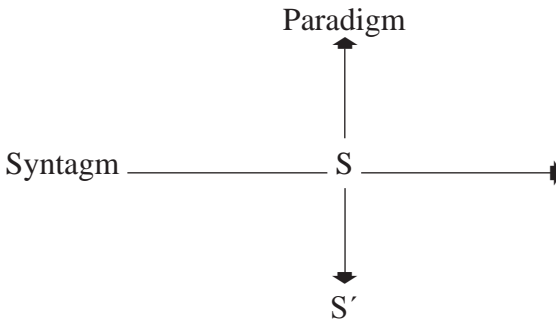
In fact Lacan *does* want to treat his formula as the multiplication of fractions, with a canceling out of S' where it appears, but if we assume that S' first designates some unknown *x* that is later metaphorized by S (as if we have just asked about its meaning), then we miss the point that S' is a latent term in the

entire operation.³

The numbered appearances of S' in the accurate version of Lacan's formula should alert us to the fact that the *manifest* signifier S first refers to some *latent* signifier S' (the terms are Freud's, of course) that will have to be retrieved, if it is retrieved at all. For in most instances, all we encounter are signifiers as they appear in the signifying chain without any thought as to the latent signifiers to which they are associatively connected—thus their canceling out.

The formula is rather complicated as it describes an operation that is latent in language. That is, it describes what seems to be an elaborate substitution of signifiers whereas in language we only encounter manifest signifiers. The concepts involved could perhaps be somewhat simplified if we realize that the substitution of signifiers refers only to the paradigmatic axis of language.

The horizontal, syntagmatic axis of language represents the signifying chain, a chaining together of signifier to signifier that produces meaningful utterances, or, to simplify, sentences. But for any signifier that appears in that chain, there are, along the vertical, paradigmatic axis, a variety of signifiers that could have been chosen:



Thus for any manifest S in the chain, there are any number of possible latent signifiers that could be designated S'. The signifier S is what appears in a meaningful utterance. And the fact that it appears means that some other signifier S' *didn't* appear. Thus the first instance of S' on the left side of Lacan's formula is designated as 1. That S', we will find after an act of interpretation, is also linked to some unknown meaning, some meaningfulness (x), that belongs to the subject. This instance of S'

is designated as 2 because it is only connected to that meaningfulness secondarily—through an act of interpretation. If there were no interpretive act, the meaningfulness would remain unknown, outside language, meaningful, but ineffable.

Let us take an example. A girl, somewhere between the ages of two and three, announces, “Someday when I’m older, I’m going to grow a tooth in my bottom.” This statement is completely inexplicable except as metaphor. It represents a startling new use of language. The girl means, of course, *penis*. But she doesn’t have the word *penis*. She doesn’t know it. And what is the only model she has for an organ that is not there initially but grows in later? A tooth. So *tooth* is the signifier that appears in the manifest signifying chain. “Penis,” here is the obvious meaning of *tooth*, but the girl doesn’t know what *penis* means, or what it would mean for her to have one. That is the unknown *x* of her experience. Surely there is a meaningfulness for her; there is a feeling, an emotional investment, attached to this lack of a penis; otherwise, she wouldn’t be talking about it.

$$\frac{\text{tooth}}{\text{penis}} \cdot \frac{\text{penis}}{x} \rightarrow \text{tooth} \left(\frac{1}{s''} \right)$$

We can now ask two questions. Why is signified on the right hand side of the formula for metaphor represented as *s* double-prime (*s''*)? And why is the outcome represented as in mixed fraction instead of a simplified fraction?

The new signified, whether childish or poetic, is not the signified of *S* (*tooth*, in this example) nor of the retrieved latent signifier *S'* (*penis*). It is an entirely new signification that combines transindividual *meaning*, which can be understood or deciphered by other speaking subjects, and individual *meaningfulness*, which is unique to a particular subject. Thus it is designated not by *s* or *s'*, but by *s''*. And since this signification (*s''*) can’t be reduced simply to the signified of *S*, the outcome of the formula is written as a mixed fraction, with *S* still standing in an “exterior” relation to the newly produced signified.

To be clear: “An organ that I’ve noticed is lacking but that may someday grow in my bottom” certainly isn’t the transindividual signified of *tooth*. And *tooth* certainly doesn’t

capture whatever feelings of deprivation, anger, confusion, or expectation went along with that idiosyncratic definition. Even for the girl in question, *tooth* will go on to become just an ordinary signifier that refers to the things she uses to chew her food. Only if she later goes into analysis and is startled by a slip of the tongue, perhaps, or a dream might she remember that *tooth* also means “penis.”

The fact that *tooth* does in fact mean “tooth” is why the reversibility of metaphor, which seemed so obvious, turns out to be less consequential than we thought. The term *tooth* is most often used in its common acceptance. But even when it’s used idiosyncratically, only *tooth* appears in the signifying chain. The other signifier is latent. Reversibility would depend upon both signifiers being equally present—and that’s not often the case.

Of course, it’s not impossible that an idiosyncratic or individual meaning of language could go on to become a commonly accepted metaphor or even a dead metaphor. For example, *shuttle* used to refer to the object that carried the thread back and forth in a loom. The first person to use the word *shuttle* to refer to a bus that carried passengers back and forth was being witty and clever. There may have been a brief time when both meanings of *shuttle* were equally accessible and thus reversible, but now, of course, we all use the term *shuttle* to refer to a bus, and very few of us know anything about looms at all.

Let’s consider again Lacan’s formula, given here in the slightly simplified version that appears in “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” (*Écrits* 557):

$$\frac{S}{S'} \cdot \frac{S'}{x} \rightarrow S\left(\frac{1}{s}\right)$$

Although Lacan is amused by the mathematical representation and the “canceling out” of the latent signifier as if this formula really were the multiplication of fractions, what gets elided in this formula is that *x* on the left side is transformed into *s* on the right *with no mathematical justification whatsoever*. And this is precisely what Lacan’s formula is intended to establish: how does

any unknown x , an idiosyncratic, individual meaningfulness, become a signified, s , that can be represented by a signifier in the signifying chain? More simply, how does any x get signified?

Since we are speaking beings, beings of language, we share transindividual meanings—but at the expense of giving up meaningfulness, our own emotional investment in the experiences that we reduce to language.⁴ And since we are unique subjects of certain experiences and emotional investments, we each enjoy a unique meaningfulness—but at the expense of never being able to share it, to express it in language. It always escapes meaning. Only in the state of being in love do we imagine that meaningfulness too can be shared.⁵

Endnotes

¹And yet this does not mean that language is open to any meaning or that all language is merely the “free play of the signifier,” as many post-structuralists insist. As Lacan says, “Interpretation is not open to all meanings” (Seminar 11 250). This is a point taken up below.

²The fact that Freud recognizes both a positive version of the Oedipus complex (in which the boy feels love for the mother and antagonism towards the father) and a negative version (in which the reverse is true) may well be his recognition that metaphors are reversible. If so, he would seem to be anticipating Lacan’s insight that the father functions as a metaphor in the Oedipal conflict. This parallel between Freud’s thought and Lacan’s would seem to have far reaching consequences. Is there, for example, a negative version of Lacan’s paternal metaphor? We shall have to see later how the Name-of-the-Father is reduced to a single metaphor.

³Indeed, Laplanche’s entire misreading of Lacan begins from just such faulty assumptions as are represented in the mistaken formula given above. His own formulas are more elaborate and ultimately result in the evacuation of all signifiers from the unconscious: “we know that the unconscious is not buzzing with words and phrases, in the sense of verbal language. . . . We need to be very precise here: the auditory, verbal representations are present in the unconscious only as thing-representations; they are treated there like ‘things’, without respect for linguistic structure.” See Jean Laplanche, *The Unconscious and the Id* (London: Rebus Press, 1999), 99. See also “The Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Study” (1960), reprinted in that volume.

⁴Cf. Harry Stack Sullivan, *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry* (New York: Norton, 1953), 19: “The original usage of . . . phonemal stations, syllables, words . . . is magical, as witness, for example, any of you who have a child who has been promised on a certain birthday a pony. As you listen to the child talk about the pony, you realize perhaps sadly that twenty-five years from now when he talks about ponies, pony will not have a thousandth of the richness of personal meaning that pony has for him now.”

⁵Cf. Seminar 24, *Love is the Failure of the Unbewoops*.

