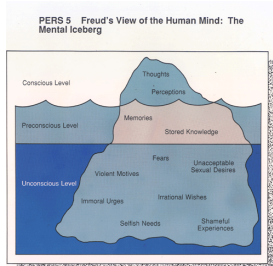


The Unconscious: Metaphor and Metonymy

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By



In his 1930s text, 'the structure of the unconscious,' Freud described the unconscious as "a fact without parallel, which defies all explanation or description." Construed through this very mystifying, if not metaphysical, perspective, the unconscious then remained to be the single most unknowable and more or less untheorizable element of all observable features of human psychology, and of the psychoanalytic enterprise as such.

Only a few decades later, however, Lacan managed to bring the unconscious to earth by describing it to be "structured like a language," and attributing its genesis to a 'split' within the developing human subject. "The psychoanalyst," he wrote, "spots the subject's split in the simple recognition of the unconscious." The Lacanian formulation of the unconscious was both more theoretically elaborate, and, for a number of reasons, definitely more successful in seeing the individual in its context and tracing the social/political in the private/psychological. Chief among those 'reasons' would be the 'linguistic turn' that his intellectual maneuvers afforded psychoanalytic theory.



One of the very useful terms in which Lacan approached his linguistic/semiotic re-formulation of the unconscious was a specific type of distinction he proposed between *metaphor* and *metonymy*. The reason I speak of a 'specific type of distinction' is that even though Lacan relied

strongly on Saussure's and Jakobson's basic descriptive models and distinctions between the two concepts, he 'slipped' significant changes into their ideas, even where he failed to admit such changes.

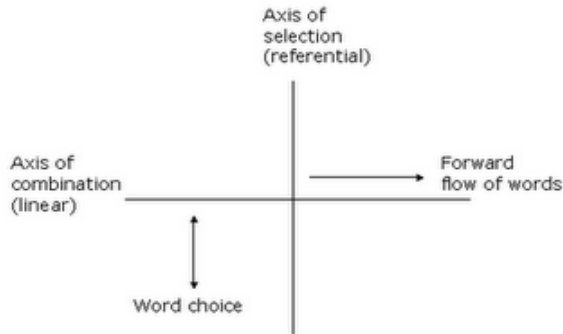
Since the distinction between metaphor and metonymy is an important element both in Lacan's formulation of the unconscious and in later readings of his work in political terms, I think we should dedicate a bit of time to that here.

The main difference between metaphor and metonymy, according to Lacan, is that metaphor functions to suppress, while metonymy functions to combine. He writes: "it is in the word-to-word connection that metonymy is based," and then: "one word for another: that is the formula of metaphor."

Jakobson, in his *Fundamentals of Language* had spoken of two aspects ("modes of arrangement") of signs: **Combination** (any sign is made up of constituent signs and/or occurs only in combination with other signs); and **Selection** (which implies 'substitution', since selection has to be made between alternatives, i.e. signs that could replace each other). Jakobson presents what he describes to be Saussure's understanding of these two modes (i.e. combination and selection), as follows:

F. de Saussure states that the former [combination] "is *in presentia*: it is based on two or several terms jointly present in an actual series", whereas the latter [selection] "connects terms *in absentia* as members of a virtual mnemonic series". That is to say, selection (and, correspondingly, substitution) deals with entities conjoined in the code but not in the given message, whereas, in the case of combination, the entities are conjoined in both, or only in the actual message. The addressee perceives that the given utterance (message) is a COMBINATION of constituent parts (sentences, words, phonemes, etc.) SELECTED from the repository of all possible constituent parts (the code). (p. 75)

So when a speaker wants to 'produce' meaning in order to communicate, he or she will have to employ the two modes of 'combination' and 'selection', while mobilizing relationships across both the diachronic and the synchronic axes.



The mode of 'selection' comes with the implication of similarity/continuity, since it indicates presence of options, which in turn indicates the presence of similarities between the range of options and thus the presence of such terms as substitution and equivalence.

For Jakobson, the quality of selection/substitution coincides with the trope/notion of metaphor, where by the merit of certain similarities one signifier can be used to refer to (or to substitute) another. The mode of 'combination, on the other hand, functions to join distinct meaning units together by locating them within the same 'context', and as such it comes with the implication of difference, discrimination, contiguity, and displacement. Jakobson argues that this notion is most closely akin to the trope of metonymy, since it is not the 'similarity' of two signifiers that associates them, but rather their contiguity, such as syntactical or physical proximity and con-textuality.

Lacan borrowed this dichotomous metaphor/metonymy distinction from Jakobson and introduced it to the structure not only of the text and its meaning, but of the human subject and its 'unconscious,' which he famously claimed to be structured like a language.

To put it in most basic terms, Lacan has managed to juxtapose the metaphor/metonymy binary set with the binary set that Freud claimed to be the basic functions of the unconscious, *i.e.* repression and displacement. Metaphor, insofar as it functions through similarities and substitutions, coincides with the psychic trope of repression, and metonymy, insofar as it functions through contiguity and difference, coincides with the psychic trope of displacement.

Just as in language the tropes of metaphor and metonymy serve to 'present' ideas in forms greatly different from their original content, in the psychic realm they offer the same function, thus rendering certain 'objects' of the mind (thoughts, feelings, signifiers, etc.) unrecognizable to 'consciousness'. In other words, 'language' and 'psyche' share the curious propensity towards and capacity for using *structure* to present (known) content in unknowable form, familiar material in unfamiliar shape –we see direct implications of this formulation for explaining such notions

as self alienated from itself, doubling and the uncanny, paranoid knowledge, etc.

So, to recap then, the two groups of ideas come together in this fashion:

Metaphor : Substitution : Condensation
Metonymy : Combination : Displacement

One thing that may concern some (not me) is the changes that Lacan introduces into the linguistic conceptions of both Saussure and Jakobson in order to render them useful for his own formulations. I would of course be open to discussing this if anybody finds it of import, but if not, let us just leave it at that, that Lacanian *linguist rie*, as he puts it himself, is simply his linguisterie, and that's that. In fact let me close this post quoting him as he addressed this issue. He writes,

When, beginning with the structure of language, I formulate metaphor in such a way as to account for what he [Freud] calls condensation in the unconscious, and I formulate metonymy in such a way as to provide the motive for displacement, they become indignant that I do not quote Jakobson (whose name would never have been suspected in my gang, if I had not pronounced it).

But when they finally read him and notice that the formula in which I articulate metonymy differs somewhat from Jakobson's formula in that he makes Freudian displacement depend upon metaphor, then they blame me, as if I had attributed my formula to him.

In the next post I will move to describe in what ways Lacan's use of these two concepts in his formulation of the unconscious lends itself to locating the political within the psychological, or in other words, to the understanding of political subjectivity. Meanwhile your feedback and comments are most welcome as always.

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