

UNCONSCIOUS COMMUNICATION AND THE RESISTANCE OF THE PSYCHOANALYST

Filip Geerardyn

Introduction

David Smith's (2002: 540-544, this issue) paper, "The Evolution of the Unconscious", reminds us of a somewhat puzzling, even problematic, element in Freud's work, namely, his fascination with the phenomenon of unconscious communication. As a comment on Smith's paper, I want to address the question of the *nature* of this unconscious communication. From a psychoanalytical point of view, several aspects of the phenomenon are relevant. The unconscious is central to psychoanalytic theory and praxis, and since the publication of Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901b), the various ways in which the unconscious reveals itself has been studied. And although speech was, and still is privileged, Freud also recognized that unconscious processes are involved in nonverbal behaviour as well, for example, in the case of parapraxes. Not alone can the parapraxes be analysed in the same way as slips of the tongue, but they also may determine the (conscious or unconscious) reaction of anyone who perceives (consciously or unconsciously) that behaviour. What is the mechanism by which a material cue (a perception) influences the perceiver? This is an important question because all intersubjective situations, such as a psychoanalytic session, involve nonverbal behaviour that has the potential to influence the interaction between patient and psychoanalyst.

Related to this is the rule of "evenly suspended attention" with which the psychoanalyst should open up his own unconscious in order to understand the unconscious of his patient. Freud's statement, cited by Smith, that "To put it in a formula: he [the analyst] must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient" (Freud, 1912e: 115), implies: 1. That an unconscious *transmits* something; 2. That an unconscious can *receive* something; and 3. That psychoanalytic treatment involves the *interaction* of the unconscious of both psychoanalyst and patient.

The problem is how we ought to conceive such an interaction: what is transmitted? How is it transmitted? And how is it received? To answer these questions, Freud makes use of a metaphor: "He [the analyst] must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone. Just as the receiver converts back into sound waves the electric oscillations in the telephone line which were set up by sound waves, so the doctor's unconscious is able, from the *derivatives of the unconscious* which are transmitted to him, to *reconstruct* that unconscious, which has determined the patient's free-associations" (*Ibid.*: 115-116). This is a problematic metaphor in that it facilitates an all too simple understanding of analytical interaction. Communication theory, for example, also makes use of this metaphor to schematize human communication in the following way: 1. What people communicate are *messages*; 2. In order to communicate a message, the sender has to encode his message; and 3. Where the receiver can accurately decode what s/he received (an encoded message), then s/he gets the message the sender wanted to communicate.

Obviously, in this model of (conscious or unconscious) communication, what is being transmitted is *meaning*. I argue that this model is incompatible with psychoanalytic theory and experience, according to which meaning can only be conceived as *emerging from* the material cues involved and as *emerging for* someone. The psychoanalytic point of view implies that any material cue (*e.g.*, a signifier or a nonverbal enactment) can give rise to the emergence of meaning that is particular to the one that receives it or reacts to it and that might be quite different from the meaning that emerges for the sender of the cue. By contrast, the idea of transmission of meaning implies that a given material cue conveys the same meaning to every possible recipient, *i.e.*, the meaning this cue has for its sender and therefore that that meaning is inextricably attached to the material conveyer. Yet there are some passages in Freud and some of his examples of unconscious communication that could allow such an interpretation. However, an example of collective forgetting from Reik cited by Freud (1901*b*: 40-42) leads us to formulate the idea that what is "communicated" unconsciously is not meaning but rather resistance. Support for this view is found in a recently published case report by Jacobs (2001).

Transmission of meaning?

Communication theory as outlined above implies an extension of Freud's statement in which no mention is made of any *message* or *meaning* that would be transmitted. Nor is this clearly suggested by the occa-

sional examples of unconscious communication he provides. In his paper "The disposition to obsessional neurosis" (1913*i*), for example, he mentions the case of a woman who had a strong desire to have a child and who developed anxiety hysteria upon learning that she could not have a child by her husband. Moreover, she did everything she could to prevent her husband from guessing the cause of her illness, *i.e.*, her frustrated wish for a child. However, her husband "understood, without any admission or explanation on her part, what his wife's anxiety meant; he felt hurt, without showing it, and in his turn reacted neurotically by – for the first time – failing in sexual intercourse with her" (Freud, 1913*i*: 320).

What we have here is an example of the way in which apparently the *meaning* of the utterances of the unconscious of one person (the anxiety of the woman) is *unconsciously understood* by the unconscious of the other person, an understanding that becomes manifest in the symptom of the man, *i.e.*, his sexual failure. In this way "[...] everyone possesses in his own unconscious an instrument with which he can interpret the utterances of the unconscious in other people" (*Ibid.*: 320). However, this does not necessarily imply that any *meaning* was transmitted and, from the description, we can only infer that both man and woman are producing symptoms in the context of an interaction, perhaps of reciprocal reproach, of imaginary identification and mirroring, the details of which are not provided.

A much more convincing description of the mechanism of unconscious communication is the one we find in Freud's metapsychological paper, "The Unconscious" (1915*e*). There he writes: "But the Ucs. is also affected by experiences originating from external perception. Normally all the paths from perception to the Ucs. remain open, and only those leading from the Ucs. are subject to blocking by repression. It is a very remarkable thing that the Ucs. of one human being can react upon that of another, without passing through the Cs" (Freud, 1915*e*: 194). Here, once more Freud does not talk about an unconscious that receives messages or meanings, but only about the fact that someone's unconscious can be *affected* by, or can *react* to, all manner of things, whether consciously or unconsciously.

As a matter of fact, in his *Interpretation of Dreams* Freud (1900*a*) dealt extensively with this mechanism and positioned it at the heart of his explanation of the formation of dreams: by means of association, some element in the actual context of the dreamer activates or triggers unconscious desires that are subsequently represented in the content of the dream. This same mechanism is also at work in so-called screen memories and in creative writing, phenomena that can only be explained by the

interaction between an unconscious that has been affected or activated and something that is externally perceived, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Freud already hinted at this mechanism at the very beginning of his discovery of the unconscious. As early as 1897, in letter 142 (Freud, 1985c: 272) to Wilhelm Fließ, Freud explains the "gripping power" of *Oedipus Rex* by the fact that "everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfilment here transplanted into reality". He then continues by saying that "[...] the same thing [the Oedipal desires] might be at the bottom of *Hamlet* as well. I am not thinking of Shakespeare's conscious intention, but believe, rather, that a real event stimulated the poet to his representation, in that *his unconscious understood the unconscious of his hero*" (*Ibid.*).

How are we to conceive of this "understanding" of one unconscious by another unconscious? Here, it can only mean that Freud interprets the inhibited behaviour of Hamlet, *i.e.*, his inability to revenge the murder of his father, as the utterance of Shakespeare's own unconscious incestuous desires. According to Freud, as a consequence of a "real event" in Shakespeare's own life, the Oedipal desires of the latter were activated and were projected in his creation of Hamlet. In the same way, the "gripping power" of classic tragedies is explained by the fact that they activate archaic desires that exist in each spectator. The understanding of one unconscious by another unconscious involves not the transmission of material, but rather a *matching* of the unconscious motives of the character (*e.g.*, Hamlet) with the motives of the creative writer and of the spectators.¹

Other examples of such unconscious communication can be traced in Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901b) and can perhaps shed some light on the precise nature of this communication. One of these examples relates to Freud's forgetting of the name of one of his patients as a consequence of his own unconscious being activated: "The patient had expressed a fear of losing his sight; this *awoke* [in Freud] the memory of a young man who had been blinded by a gunshot; and this in turn was connected with the figure of yet another youth, who had injured himself by shooting. This last person had the same name as the first patient, though he was not related to him. However, I did not find the name until I had become conscious that an anxious expectation was being transferred by me from these two young men who had been injured to a member of my

1. Elsewhere (Geerardyn, 2002) we have analysed in detail the way in which Shakespeare's *Hamlet* enabled Freud 1. to listen with "the third ear" to the utterances of his own Oedipal desires; and 2. to discover the Oedipus complex.

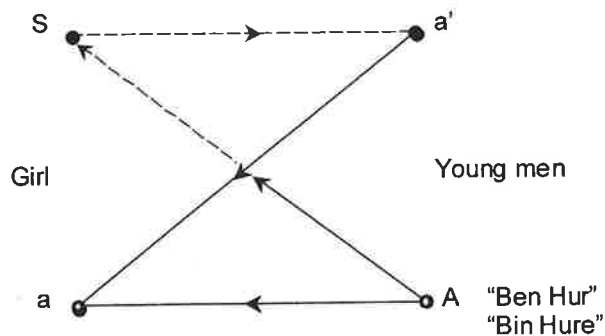
own family" (Freud, 1901b: 24). Interestingly, Freud's comment on this example runs as follows: "There thus runs through my thoughts a continuous current of 'personal reference', of which I generally have no inkling, but which betrays itself by such instances of my forgetting names. It is as if I were obliged to compare everything I hear about other people with myself; as if my personal complexes were put on the alert whenever another person is brought to my notice. This cannot possibly be an individual peculiarity of my own: it must rather contain an indication of the way in which we understand 'something other than our self' in general" (*Ibid.*).

What Freud is saying and demonstrating here is that in principle, every interaction with another person awakens the "personal complex" to which evidently preconscious and, ultimately even unconscious thoughts, anxieties and desires are associated. Moreover, whenever we fend off or repress activated thoughts or desires, there is the possibility that they will be expressed in our parapraxes. But this does not necessitate a return to the concept of unconscious transmission of meaning.

A second example worth referring to here is one that was, not coincidentally, told to Freud by Theodor Reik, the author of *Listening with the Third Ear* (1948). The situation is described as follows: at a university gathering, a young lady is conversing with some young men and relates her reading of an English novel in which the life and death of Christ is portrayed. Although she has a very clear visual memory of the cover of the book, she cannot remember the title of the novel. Three of the young men present say that they also read the book but none of them could come up with the title either. The young woman subsequently analysed this instance of her forgetting and concluded that the reason why she could not remember the title had something to do with the presence of the young men, as well as with the thoughts she associatively connected with the title of the book. The title, *Ben Hur*, by Lewis Wallace, through its translation into the German "bin Hure", activated her unconscious wish to present herself as a sexual object to the young men, an idea that she fended off and as a result of which she forgot the title of the book.

So far, we can hardly take issue with this explanation for the forgetting of a proper name. The following schema formalises the context described by Reik in that it represents the girl addressing herself to the three young men in the course of the conversation about Wallace's book. While directly addressing herself to the three young men (axis a – a'), she does not allow her unconscious sexual desire to be expressed. Indeed, as Reik also indicates, it is only after the meeting at the university, *i.e.*, when outside the situation in which she addresses herself directly to the young men

as her equals or alter-egos, that she can recognize the second meaning of the signifiers, *Ben Hur*, as reflecting the non-acceptable and unconscious desires that were somehow activated in their presence. To put it another way: it is only then that she can listen to these signifiers with Reik's "third ear" and as a consequence her unconscious desire is revealed by these signifiers as such (axis "Ben Hur"/"bin Hure" – S).²



The next part of the story, however, is far more difficult to explain convincingly from the information reported. As noted by Reik, interestingly enough, during their conversation with the girl at the university none of the three young men could come up with the title of the book even though they had all read it. According to Reik's interpretation, this collective forgetting was due to the fact that their unconscious "understood", as it were, the unconscious motivation of the girl's forgetting, as a consequence of which they in turn "politely" forgot the title of Wallace's novel. Freud quotes Reik's story as an example of the fact that forgetting of names is often *contagious*. This formulation too might suggest the notion of unconscious *meaning* being transferred.

But even taking this example into account we do not have to revert to this interpretation. The forgetting of the title *Ben Hur* by the three young men could be explained by the fact that this signifier, as indicated by Reik, was associated with the content of the conversation for them too because

2. In this application of Lacan's (1966: 53) schema, the symbols (a) and (a') stand for the ego (a) addressing itself to its alter-ego (a') on the axis of mirroring (or imaginary identification) and resistance while on the symbolic axis the Freudian *Es* (S) is revealed through the Lacanian Other (A) defined as the symbolic order. According to Lacan, both axes interfere in every intersubjective situation, such as, in an analytic session in which any revealing of the unconscious is likely to meet resistance.

they all read the book and thus knew the title. One could speculate and suggest that the three young men forgot the name as a consequence of fending off their own unconscious, and not necessarily polite, desire to treat the girl as a sexual object, a desire that would have been unconsciously triggered by the signifier *Ben Hur*. Evidence for this hypothesis, however, is not provided and could of course only have been obtained via a threefold analysis of their forgetting of the proper name *Ben Hur*. Indeed, each of the three young men could have had his own particular motivation to repress it and the only thing that we know for sure is that the unconscious of the three young men was apparently activated by some aspect of the situation, as a consequence of which they too forgot the name. In other words, it is not unconscious meaning that is contagious but rather *resistance*.

Unconscious communication and resistance

Smith's (2002: 543, this issue) clinical example of unconscious communication suggests that the psychoanalyst, in proposing to his patient that they increase the frequency of sessions, unconsciously communicated his avaricious motives and they were unconsciously understood by the patient. Evidence for this understanding is found in the patient's narratives about the greedy shark in *Jaws*, about the prostitutes on the street and the drug dealers in the neighbourhood, narratives through which the patient complained about and commented on his psychoanalyst and that carried the same meaning as the intervention of the psychoanalyst. This meaning would thus have been transmitted unconsciously.

Again there appears to be no evidence for this conclusion. The only inference that can be made is that apparently the analytical process was disrupted. Traditionally, psychoanalysts have interpreted any such disruption as an obvious resistance on the patient's part to the analytical process. From a Lacanian, somewhat provocative, point of view however, this resistance eventually comes down to the resistance of the psychoanalyst, which means that in any case of enduring resistance the psychoanalyst must consider himself to be the cause of it. Applied to Smith's example this would mean that in reaction to the intervention of his psychoanalyst, the patient's narratives reflect *not his own* resistance, but that of his psychoanalyst, in so far as the analyst's his intervention directed the patient's response on the axis of mirroring and resistance.

Recently Jacobs (2001) published an excellent and extensive clinical fragment of an analysis with one of his patients in which the disruption of the analytical process due to the resistance of the psychoanalyst is recog-

nized and is demonstrated in some detail, although in his explanation of the phenomenon the author holds fast to the mystifying idea of unconscious communication of meaning through nonverbal enactments. Jacobs relates the sudden disruption of the analysis of a young man who, at a particular moment, was working through his ambivalent feelings toward his father. The abrupt, strenuous resistance of the patient was overcome only when Jacobs realized that he himself had difficulties confronting his ambivalence toward his own father. This ambivalence had surfaced some months before when his father became seriously ill and it was only on analysing his subsequent reactions (e.g., enactments that demonstrated his identification with the clinical picture of his father and that were perceived and reacted to by his patient, also in enactments) that he could allow his patient to continue the working through: "In fact, I realized later that my behaviour in not dealing earlier with F's persistent focus on S as a resistance was motivated in part by defensive needs of my own. Although I was not conscious of it at the time, I must have sensed that to engage F's resistance and to pursue the question of his deep and troubling ambivalence toward his own father would, inevitably, stir conflicts in myself that I was not ready to face" (Jacobs, 2001: 16).³

Discussion

In the examples mentioned above, there is no convincing evidence for any conception of the transmission or transference of meaning. The most we can conclude is that, in general: 1. for a given subject, any material cue that is perceived consciously or unconsciously can activate preconscious and even unconscious processes; and 2. any emerging meaning depends on the particular context that is activated and can only emerge as such through the Other.

This psychical functioning is true of a much more complicated intersubjective "real life" situation as well as of the analytical situation in which all kind of cues – verbal and nonverbal – influence the interaction between two individuals. An important difference between these two

3. Some of these enactments are mentioned below. But it was only when Jacobs analysed a particular enactment, i.e., his mixing up, one morning, of two suits, a parapraxis to which his patient had reacted strongly, that it became clear to him that, in his words "these enactments, in fact, conveyed messages of the greatest importance, messages that for each of us could not be otherwise transmitted; [...] The quick, but penetrating, look he gave me at the end of that session conveyed F's anxiety and his concern. Not grasping the significance of his behaviour [...] I let it pass and did not bring the matter up in the following session. Thus it was necessary for F, about a week later, to repeat this piece of nonverbal behaviour in order to get his message through" (Jacobs, 2001: 12-15).

situations concerns the use of the rule of free association that demands of the patient that s/he verbalize without any restriction and of the psychoanalyst that s/he listens to this symbolising process with so-called evenly suspended attention, *i.e.*, focused and intervening on the level of the material signifier as such, rather than on the meaning that emerges from this symbolising. Free association and evenly suspended attention do not, of course, exclude the possibility of the analytical process being influenced by any other material cue present in the analytical situation. It seems obvious that there is influence of this sort present in every analysis but this does not necessarily disturb the analytical process. I would argue that this could happen but only when some "personal complex" of the psychoanalyst is somehow awakened *and* repressed by him. At that moment, the psychoanalyst can no longer listen with his "third ear" and, as a consequence, his resistance is likely to become contagious.

From Jacobs' clinical case, we learn that the resistance of the psychoanalyst was established as a reaction to the illness of his father, a reaction that was perceived and reacted to by his patient F. It is conceivable that Jacobs' other patients had also perceived his enactments: "In the months after my father's illness struck, I, too, began to make a number of mistakes. I miscalculated some bills, forgot to hand out others, lost my appointment book, and neglected to inform some patients about times when I would be out of the office" (*Ibid.*: 14). These enactments transpired to be a function of his resistance in relation to recognizing his unconscious ambivalence toward his own father. But how did the other patients react? The transmission of meaning theory would suggest that the same meaning (Oedipal ambivalence) would have been transmitted to all of them, whether or not they too were traumatised by the image of a sick, deteriorating and dying father, an image that (for F at least) their psychoanalyst momentarily resembled as a result of his imaginary identification with his own father. Further, as this theme is crucial in most analytic cures, we would expect that its transmission affected the analysis of all patients, in that it would have activated this complex in each of them. This in turn implies that every cure would have been disrupted more or less to the same extent, as the psychoanalyst was, at that moment, unable to deal with a resistance that matched his own.

It seems improbable that Jacobs' father's illness affected his capacities as an analyst (or his desire as an analyst, as Lacanians would articulate it) in that it made it impossible for him to intervene adequately in *all* his cures. For F, however, the enactments of his analyst were traumatic or, at least, they activated the memory of the traumatic event in his life history, and as a consequence, a dialectic of reciprocal resistance was established

in his cure. It is tempting to explain any such reciprocal resistance or matching of repressed unconscious motives by the mechanism of unconscious communication through verbal and/or nonverbal cues that "convey messages" (*Ibid.*: 8, 12, 21). However, any similarity between motives repressed by the psychoanalyst on the one hand, and by the patient on the other, does not prove that they had been unconsciously transmitted.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the fact that Freud's own writings do not categorically rule out a mystic conceptualisation of analytical interaction (the transmission of meaning theory), we should note that he also stressed the importance of what he called the "possibility of establishing an *external* association" (Freud, 1901*b*: 6) in his explanation of psychical mechanisms at work in the phenomena he analysed. This condition can be identified as the Lacanian signifier, defined as a material cue (the acoustic sound image) that, when perceived, is easily associated with preconscious material (word presentations) and hence can activate the unconscious. But its formal characteristics have, as such, no definite meaning attached to them and any meaning that might emerge for someone is the result of the particular context to which the signifier becomes associated. The effect of other material cues (such as nonverbal enactments) that are (consciously or unconsciously) perceived by someone is much harder to trace but it seems equally dubious that they convey meaning.

Filip Geerardyn

H. Dunantlaan 2

B-9000 Gent

Tel.: ++ 32 9 264 63 57

Filip.Geerardyn@UGent.be

Summary

Unconscious communication and the resistance of the psychoanalyst

As a comment on Smith's paper, "The Evolution of the Unconscious" (2002), the question of the nature of so-called unconscious communication is addressed. Some passages in Freud's writings appear to suggest that this phenomenon can be explained by the transmission of meaning theory according to which what is communicated or transmitted in unconscious communication comes down to the transmission of unconscious meaning attached to material cues that are consciously or unconsciously perceived. With reference to some reported examples of unconscious communication, it is argued that there is no convincing support for this theory and that, at best, they demonstrate that what is communicated is not meaning but rather resistance. It is further argued that the extensive clinical case published by Jacobs (2001) in

which a disruption of the analytical process is explained by the conveyance of unconscious messages attached to the nonverbal enactments of the psychoanalyst does not require us to accept the transmission of meaning theory but rather provides an excellent example of the notion that the resistance of the patient is ultimately explained in relation to the resistance of the analyst.

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