

NOTHING FOR NOTHING: LACAN AND LANGUAGE IN THE 1950s¹

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Summary: This paper explores how the influence of cybernetics *within* structuralism contributed to Lacan's theory of the signifier as (functioning within a) structure. By examining his Freudian exploration within the broader scheme of American and French thought, the author extrapolates the link between these two theoretical paradigms and the implications that this had for his work. It is argued that in contrast to the apparent ease with which the structuralist paradigm was incorporated into Lacan's theory, the surprise of his *Seminar* attendees when presented with cybernetics in 1954 was not altogether warranted. By exploring the close interaction between Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss during the 1940s, the author shows that the structuralist paradigm was already quite heavily invested by cybernetics. In commenting on two slightly different translations of an intervention that Lacan makes during the *Bonneval Colloquium* with Jean Hyppolite, the author pinpoints a likely turning point within Lacan's work, within the context of his thesis on the temporality of the signifier and its relationship to the Freudian notion of repetition.

Key words: Cybernetics, Structuralism, Retroaction, *Nachträglichkeit*, Temporality, Repetition, *Après-coup*.

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"Without cybernetics, psychoanalysis is inconceivable"
(Lovink, 1994)

1. The present paper is part of a larger thesis on repetition and temporality in Lacan's work during the 1950s, where I focus on a particular limit in what structuralism could offer Lacan, and on the significance of the moment at which cybernetics was incorporated into his theoretical framework (see Murphy, 2013). I am greatly indebted to Gertrudis Van de Vijver for her continuing support in the writing process of this thesis, and much more than that.

Introduction

The title of this paper "Nothing for Nothing" was a phrase used by Immanuel Kant to define the impetus of teleology in broad terms. For Kant "Nothing for Nothing" implies that there is nothing there without a purpose, that nothing simply is in and of itself, but only in so far as it has something to do with something else, something that it is not. This sentiment seems to encapsulate something that was more or less common to two apparently separate paradigms that provided a source of inspiration for Jacques Lacan during the 1950s: structuralism and cybernetics. I describe these paradigms as "apparently separate" because when one looks at the history of these disciplines, and in particular how they were disseminated in France during Lacan's early Seminar, the distinction between them is less obvious than one might think.

This paper explores how the cybernetics within structuralism contributed to Lacan's theory of the signifier as (functioning within a) structure, eventually bringing him to the assertion that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Lacan 1973 [1964]: 20). By looking at what was taking place around him during that decade, and situating his Freudian exploration into the broader scheme of American and French thought, we can firstly extrapolate the link between these two theoretical paradigms (as Lacan was making use of them during this time) and secondly the implications that this had for his work (i.e., a topological model of the unconscious). Indeed, in contrast to the apparent ease with which the structuralist paradigm was incorporated into Lacan's theory, the surprise of his Seminar attendees when presented with cybernetics in 1954 was not altogether warranted. Below we will see that the structuralist paradigm was already quite heavily invested by the cybernetics during the 1940s, as evidenced by the close interaction between Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss. By focussing on this period, the complexity of Lacan's early work, particularly in the context of repetition and temporality, might be unravelled to a small degree.

Structuralism and cybernetics in the 1950s

Structural linguistics and cybernetics were two theoretical paradigms that, to a greater or lesser extent, influenced numerous schools of thought during the 1950s and thereafter. While during that

decade Lacan is said to have been reading Freud in a manner moulded by the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and the anthropological studies of Claude Lévi-Strauss, what seems less acknowledged is how these sources of inspiration are largely inseparable from the manner in which the American field of cybernetics permeated the structuralist movement as a whole. Indeed, the difficulty in separating these theoretical paradigms is probably most evident in Lacan's capacity to so seamlessly combine them in his addendum to the "Purloined Letter" (Lacan, 2006 [1966]). There, his theory of the signifier as structure is effortlessly woven into his unfolding conceptualisation of "the subject", a thesis largely facilitated through his focus on repetition, temporality and the logic of the unconscious (Murphy, 2013).

As we know, de Saussure's analysis of language, as distinct from his neogrammarian forbearers, subsequently became known as structural linguistics, one strand of which evolved (through the work of other scholars) into what we know as the structuralist movement. Cybernetics, on the other hand, was a theoretical paradigm that emerged in tandem with the engineering endeavours of World War II, establishing itself as a discipline from about 1943 onwards with the publication "Behavior, Purpose and Teleology" (Rosenblueth, Wiener, & Bigelow, 1943). In order to look at how structuralism and cybernetics permeated Lacan's work during the 1950s, particularly within the context of his thesis on the temporality of the signifier and his aim to develop a topological model of the unconscious, I contextualize it by focusing on an intervention he makes at the very end of that decade during the Bonneval Colloquium with Jean Hyppolite, two translations of which are worthy of comment.² We will start with the first (perhaps more accurate) translation by Bruce Fink: "One notices here that it is the closing of the unconscious which provides the key to its space – namely, the impropriety of trying to turn it into an inside. This closing also demonstrates the core of a reversion time, quite necessarily introduced [if we are to explain] the efficacy of discourse. It is rather easily perceived in something I have been emphasising for a long time: the retroactive effect of meaning in sentences, meaning requiring the last word of a sentence to be sealed [*se boucler*]. *Nachträglichkeit* (remember that I was the first to extract it from Freud's texts) or deferred action [*après-coup*], by which

2. This intervention, made in 1960, unfolded into a rather lengthy commentary that was later published in the *Écrits* under the title "The Position of the Unconscious" (Lacan, 2006 [1964]).

trauma becomes involved in symptoms, reveals a temporal structure of a higher order" (Lacan, 2006 [1964]: 711).

In this fragment, Lacan seems to be returning to a theme that had evolved through his seminar series of the previous decade with respect to the temporal and spacial rendering of the (signifier of the) unconscious. A number of dense concepts come into play, one of which I will only comment on briefly before focusing on the main point that he seems to be communicating, and indeed isolating this "main point" is aided by looking at the second (mis)translation we will refer to further on.

In the first part, Lacan is commenting on the topological model of the unconscious that he was interested in developing. Here, he merges the spacial and the temporal status of the unconscious as structured like a language with reference to closure, a topology that is more clearly borne out in Seminar XXIII (Lacan, 2005 [1975-1976]) with his well-known use of the Möbius strip. In that thesis, any possible unconscious interior/exterior is undermined: manifestations of the unconscious, or what we could call the traumatic side of the signifier, permeate speech and language and should be sought on the surface, not the depths where they will be missed. This topology is largely a spacial synthesis enveloping the two sides of the distinction he wants to communicate in the thrust of the intervention, bringing us to the latter part of the fragment. Here we will briefly digress to the alternative translation of the same fragment presented by Forrester (1990). According to him, Lacan states: "[The closing of the unconscious] also indicates the kernel of a reversible time, which is entirely necessary to introduce to account for any efficacy of discourse; it is already quite discernable in the retroaction, upon which I have for a long time now insisted, of meaning in a phrase, which requires its last word so as to be closed. *Nachträglich* (remember I was the first to unearth it from Freud's text) *nachträglich* or deferred action, in accordance with which the trauma is implicated in the symptom, displays a temporal structure of a higher order than... *the reversible time in discourse*" (Forrester, 1990: 363-364, ft.137, final italics added).

While this translation is not altogether accurate, in that the final clause "than... the reversible time in discourse" does not appear in the original French text, it is nevertheless an interesting interpretation of

what Lacan appears to be implying but not stating explicitly.³ In other words, Lacan appears pressed to remind the Bonneval audience of the two sides of the signifier, and thus, the distinction that must be made between two temporal orders: a) retroaction, or the reversible time of language and discourse (i.e., meaning) and; b) *Nachträglichkeit* (non-meaning). The latter refers to an unconscious mechanism, sometimes translated as deferred action or *après-coup*, associated with the part of the signifier that is marked by a temporality of a higher (or different) order than that associated with language, meaning, and discourse. Thus, terms such as surface or depth are no longer tenable, as we are dealing with b) the traumatic part of the signifier (non-meaning) that permeates, and thus returns in a) speech and language, *nachträglich*.

In emphasising this distinction between the signifier of language and the signifier of the unconscious, and moving towards his assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language, Lacan is simultaneously warning us not to take this proposition literally, or at least to refrain from understanding it too quickly. For Lacan the unconscious is structured, point. The proposition that it is structured like a language might be understood as a metaphor; the unconscious is structured like a language to the extent that both language and the unconscious embrace the signifier. But we will come back to this.

Below we will look at the work of de Saussure, Jakobson, and Lévi-Strauss, and explore the inspiration Lacan drew from these theorists. Following this we will return to the quoted passage and argue that the distinction he is emphasising explains something of why cybernetics was taken up, arguably at a point where structuralism was no longer useful in terms of grasping the temporality of the signifier; that is, the means by which trauma becomes involved in symptoms.

Ferdinand de Saussure

What was common to Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and Lacan, was the inspiration they drew from Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's teaching together with the modifications they made to his thesis, each for their own (theoretical) aims and domains. Indeed, it was precisely the versatility with which de Saussure's method of structural analysis could be integrated into various domains that led to what became

3. I would like to thank Lieven Jonckheere for drawing my attention to the discrepancy between the original French text and Forrester's (1990) translation of this fragment, and for his guidance on this point.

known as the structuralist movement, a conceptual flexibility that was certainly paralleled in cybernetics. The basic notion of structure was a legacy of de Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, a series of lectures given at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911. Published posthumously in book form in 1916, this text largely comprises a compilation of notes taken by a few loyal students that attended his class. Regarded as the starting point of structural linguistics, de Saussure's *Cours* initially received relatively little attention (Falk, 2008). Yet with various modifications, de Saussure's thesis on structure and system was taken on board by members of the Copenhagen, Moscow, and Prague Linguistic Circles (Roman Jakobson being the founding member of the latter two schools) and inspired developments in the study of poetics, semiotics and phonology.⁴ De Saussure's teaching would not make any significant impression until the 1930s in France, and the 1940s in America (largely through Jakobson's arrival in 1941 and with his work at the New York *École Libre des Hautes Études*). De Saussure was eventually recognised for his work retrospectively, which then prospered across Europe and the United States in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the importance of his work was anticipated in 1923, when, in a review of his *Cours*, American linguist Leonard Bloomfield described him as having given us "the theoretical basis for a science of human speech" (Bloomfield, 1923: 319).

De Saussure deviated from his neogrammarian forebears in a number of ways. Firstly, he argued for a distinction between what he called synchronic linguistics and diachronic linguistics (Falk, 1995). Briefly put, the diachronic approach to linguistics, prevalent during the nineteenth century, comprised the study of how language changes over time; the synchronic approach comprised a more static view of language, i.e., how language exists for speakers at a specific moment in time (Falk, 2008), a focus which would eventually dominate twentieth century linguistics, particularly in the United States.⁵

For de Saussure, the instance of speech (*parole*) of individual members of a linguistic community should not be the focus of linguistic theory. What should be the focus is the language (*langue*), i.e., the common code, that the community shares. Broadly speaking,

4. Although associated with semiotics, de Saussure's *Cours* contained only a handful of paragraphs on this topic (Bouissac, 2004).

5. The terms synchronic/diachronic will be used somewhat differently when we look at the work of Jakobson and Lacan.

de Saussure's structural analysis of language (*langue*) largely focused on three systemic relationships: "That between a signifier and a signified; those between a sign and all of the other elements of its system; and those between a sign and the elements which surround it within a concrete signifying instance" (Silverman, 1983: 10).

For de Saussure, the basic unit of language (*langue*) is the Sign, constituted, on the one hand, by the signifier (the phonological, acoustic element, or the mental image produced by sound), and on the other hand, by the signified (i.e., the conceptual element, or the concept to which this acoustic element refers). In other words, a signifier signifies a signified, and taken together as a unity, they form the Sign (de Saussure, 1974 [1916]: 66-67). Here, the signifier and the signified are understood as mutually interdependent, i.e., they have equal status in forming mutually dependant sides of the Sign.

Moreover, meaning emerges out of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic differences between signs. The former refers to the position of the sign with respect to other signs, the latter, to the possibility of substituting one sign for another in the process of signification (*Ibid.*: 122). Language is a system of signs made up of binary oppositions and thus should be analysed as a system in which there are no positive terms, only differences (*Ibid.*: 120). In other words, in de Saussure's system, each unit is constituted on the basis of its difference from the other units in the system, which in turn is basis for the notion of structure.

De Saussure's method of structural analysis influenced other domains, particularly the social sciences, whereby the meaning of something would no longer be considered in itself, but could only be extracted through comparison. This basic idea becomes interesting when we see how Claude Lévi-Strauss takes it up in his analysis of kinship patterns and the myth. However, as we will see, Lévi-Strauss encountered a notion of structure that had already been heavily invested by cybernetics, as discussed further on. Before doing so, we must firstly discuss the man responsible for this.

Roman Jakobson

Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1896-1962), commonly regarded as having coined the term "structural linguistics", applied de Saussure's method of analysis a little differently. Inspired, in particular, by de Saussure's ideas around structure and system, he would eventually diverge from de Saussure's teaching and harbour

such criticism of his theory that if it was not for the thrust of his reproach, we most likely would not be as familiar with de Saussure's work as we are. In other words, it is arguable that it was Jakobson's relentless criticism of de Saussure that actually put the latter's work on the map more than anything else. We will not dwell on Jakobson's public use of de Saussure as a foil for his own theses here, but concentrate briefly on his work in the 1920s, and focus on his line of thinking in the 1930s and 1940s. This way we can clarify the definition of structure that he would share with his colleague to-be, Lévi-Strauss, a definition that would eventually complete a circuit by being (once again) returned to France in the 1950s. As Jakobson has published so extensively, the easiest way to summarise his theoretical position is to outline the main themes upon which he diverged from de Saussure, which has much to do with the intellectual context he found himself in the midst of in New York.⁶

Jakobson's encounter with cybernetics during the early 1940s convinced him that through Information Theory (IT), linguistics could finally be placed on the map of the hard sciences, or more precisely, the exact sciences. As mentioned above, cybernetics was a theoretical paradigm that emerged in tandem with the engineering endeavours of World War II. Below we will give a brief history of this multi-disciplinary paradigm, such that its resonance with structuralism can be elucidated. Cybernetics derived from a techno-scientific project instigated by the American government during the war in the early-1940s (Lafontaine, 2007: 28). While it cannot be entirely attributed to the work of the mathematician Norbert Wiener (1896-1964), his text *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1954 [1950]) prompted much interest in this field of study, most notably in French intellectual circles (Lafontaine, 2007: 30-31). As a theory, cybernetics largely developed out of a number of informal meetings known as the Macy Conferences in New York starting from 1942. While these conferences are often remembered because of the reputation of the attendees, their scientific impact was largely due to the desire of participants to unite diverse fields of knowledge. During the conferences, apart from mathematicians and engineers, researchers from different disciplines, including sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis, biology, neurology, anthropology, and linguistics, came together and discussed whether it was possible to extend the use

6. For an excellent review of Jakobson's affinity with cybernetics and IT, see Van de Walle (2008).

of new engineering techniques to their own discipline. Drawing inspiration from these interdisciplinary meetings, Jakobson's divergence from de Saussure's theory became more concise. His attendance and contribution (1948)⁷ to the Macy conferences together with his correspondence with both Norbert Weiner and Warren Weaver in 1949 (Kay, 2000: 297, 300), and Claude Shannon⁸ in 1951 (Mindell, Segal, & Gerovitch 2003; Van de Walle, 2008) illustrates his keen interest in using cybernetic theory as a means of reinventing linguistic theory. The theoretical developments that he made for linguistic theory are difficult to deal with separately, but if we focus only of his divergence from de Saussure, we could broadly (albeit, not exhaustively) summarise them on the basis of the following Saussurean ideas. These being the concept of the phoneme as the smallest unit of language; his notion of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of language and strict separation between *langue* and *parole*; and his understanding of the distinction between diachrony and synchrony.

The phoneme

Jakobson's early study of poetry eventually brought him to seek out a theory of metrics that could be universally applied to all human languages. While at that time "metrics" conventionally concentrated on aspects of language such as syllable, length, and stress, from Jakobson's point of view, a more sophisticated theory of metrics should also consider the smaller phonetic features of language, such as consonants and vowels, and above all the absence and presence of boundaries between words (Falk, 2008). His ongoing study of the way in which ancient and contemporary sound systems are structured brought him to develop a theory in the 1930s that sounds in language, i.e., phonemes, are composed of individual features that are distinguishable from one another and thus worthy of analysis (*Ibid.*). Indeed, in his search for a universal framework that could be applied to all languages, and similar to de Saussure's analysis of the system of signs, Jakobson proposed that "the distinctive features of languages

7. Unfortunately Jakobson's contribution to the Macy Conferences was not transcribed, as transcriptions commenced only at the 6th conference (Dupuy, 1999: 71-72; Van de Walle, 2008).

8. Weiner, Shannon, and Weaver were key figures in the then evolving field of cybernetics, with seminal publications such as *The Human Use of Human Beings* (Wiener, 1954 [1950]) and *A Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Shannon & Weaver, 1964 [1949]).

are binary; each exists as a two-way opposition" (*Ibid.*: 1987).⁹ The main difference for Jakobson is that, whereas de Saussure also concentrated on the Sign and the phoneme, Jakobson as a phonologist, further emphasises the important distinctions that should be made between smaller even units of language, such as, morphemes, and so forth. In this capacity, he went on to establish what he defined as the "mirror-image relationship' between the acquisition order of distinctive oppositions in sounds by children, and the loss of those oppositions in victims of aphasia" (*Ibid.*: 1987). His interest in the linguistic mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy was not far removed from this study of the psychological processes associated with such language disturbances.

De Saussure's syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of language

While in the 1930s Jakobson was satisfied to use de Saussure's terminology of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of language, through his affinity with cybernetics these terms were replaced by combination and selection respectively. In spite of this shift in terminology, in addition to his often unfair criticism of de Saussure (Van de Walle, 2008), Jakobson (1956) nevertheless continues to follow his analysis of the structure of language along Saussurean lines. In other words, he continues to examine the relationships between linguistic units whereby all linguistic units involve certain modes of arrangement, and this is evident in his analysis of the links between these units, over and beyond the actual units themselves. Moreover, whereas de Saussure's syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes emphasised relations present in language, Jakobson's emphasis on the mechanisms of combination and selection seems to lean more towards their associated psychological processes, i.e., "procedures the speaker (and listener) performs while receiving and decoding a message" (Van de Walle, 2008: 114).¹⁰

9. For example, "English *b* is distinct from *p* by the opposition voiced/voiceless, whereas *b* is distinct from *m* by the opposition oral/nasal" (Falk, 2008: 1987). In the United States, Jakobson goes on to try to elaborate the articulatory and acoustic grounds upon which such distinctive features could be understood, eventually opening up the field of generative phonology, culminating in the seminal text *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis: The Distinctive Features and Their Correlates* (Jakobson, 1969 [1952]).

10. This insinuation that de Saussure wholly neglected consideration of the psychological processes associated with the speaker and listener is unjustified and above all reflects Jakobson's rather shallow reading of the latter's work more than anything else (Van de Walle, 2008). Moreover, in contrast to de Saussure's (alleged) separation between *langue* and *parole*,

In Jakobson's terms, whereas combination refers to the idea that each linguistic unit gains meaning both from its context and its combination with other linguistic units, selection refers to the idea that such linguistic units also gain meaning insofar as they are derived from a group of other units which could form adequate substitutions. For Jakobson, while the two modes of arrangement are interrelated, they constitute different linguistic operations (Moock, 1995: 1). The fruit of Jakobson's divergence from de Saussure becomes more obvious in his 1956 essay "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances", where the twofold character of language, combination and selection, is elaborated in terms of two axes of language, a metaphorical axis and a metonymic axis in the context of linguistic and psychological processes. In brief, Jakobson's question concerned whether aphasia could be understood as a problem at the level of metaphor or metonymy: here we could define the metonymic (horizontal) axis of language with respect to the sequential ordering of signifiers, as they concatenate to form the syntax underlying sentence structure. The metaphoric (vertical) axis of language is the domain of substitution, wherein signifiers may be substituted for one another in the production of meaning.

In spite of the difference between Jakobson and de Saussure, what is important in terms of structuralism is the central and most basic point they seem to agree upon. Throughout Jakobson's entire career of phonemic analyses, he continues to draw upon de Saussure's thesis of "the purely negative character of the phoneme" (Van de Walle, 2008: 114). It is on precisely this common ground that we can conclude this section on de Saussure and Jakobson with a broad definition of "structure" as it would be imparted by Jakobson (with respect to structural linguistics) to Lévi-Strauss (who would take inspiration from this in his anthropological theses): in both de Saussure's and Jakobson's structural analyses of language the fundamental idea is that "the sole information carried by a distinctive feature is precisely its distinctiveness" (Jakobson, Fant, & Halle, 1969 [1952]: 9) or, put another way, an element in a structure can only posit itself as being what it is via the detour of being what it is not, whereby the meaning of something can only be extracted through comparison. This resonates with Kant's interpretation of the impetus of teleology, as mentioned above; that there is nothing there without a purpose, that

for Jakobson, making such a strict separation was ill-starred, and the terms were replaced by *code* and *message* respectively, which were by no means to be studied separately.

nothing simply is in and of itself, but only in so far as it has something to do with something else, something that it is not. This will be further elaborated by Lévi-Strauss in his structural analysis of kinship patterns and the myths that transcend culture, albeit, with his own theoretical rigor.

Lévi-Strauss

Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), the philosophy scholar and, at this stage only embarking upon anthropological research, first came across this notion of structure through his meeting with Jakobson at the *École Libre des Hautes Études* in New York in the 1940s. The circumstances under which the two scholars came to meet are perhaps not irrelevant, as it was largely due to a rescue program for European intellectuals (during World War II) that led vast numbers of scientists and academics to take up posts scattered across America, a turn of events that likely facilitated the success of the cybernetic Macy conferences.

Like others at that time, Lévi-Strauss's intellectual influences included psychoanalysis, Marxism and geology (discourses which one could say had the common predilection of deciphering the deep meanings or structures hidden beneath the surface). He described his first encounter with this idea of structure as a "revelation" (Eribon, 1991: 41), and it thus became the guiding notion of his entire intellectual life. Taking inspiration from informal conversations with Jakobson, he applied this notion of structure to the study of kinship systems. However, similar to how Jakobson (as phonologist and advocate of cybernetics) deviated from de Saussure's theory, Lévi-Strauss further developed this notion of structure in a rather radical way. What was distinct about Lévi-Strauss's approach was that he did not seem to permit any kind of dialectic that we, as humans, create structures and then structures, in turn, create us (where we have a kind of reciprocity, as de Saussure might have believed). Instead, he seemed to believe that structures, such as those inherent in languages, kinship systems, or myths, are self-generating and self-creating; that structures think themselves through themselves, and in that sense, they are exclusive of the human. This view of so-called self-creating structures reflects the notion of a relatively autonomous system, or a structured order into which we are born, and this is a subtle but nevertheless quite radical formulation, which was not obvious in de Saussure's theses at all.

This notion of a seemingly autonomous symbolic system emerged through his confrontation with what he saw as unusual tales, kinship patterns, and behaviours. His basic hypothesis was that there must be hidden rules behind these apparently diverse customs and these hidden rules are similar to the grammatical and syntactical rules that we apply in speech and language (without necessarily being conscious of it). By using this notion of structure in the task of extracting this hidden grammar, his first project (part of his PhD, which we know as *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969 [1949])) was an immensely ambitious attempt to discover the common denominator, or at least the underlying similarities between all the kinship systems in the world.

In that text, we could say, one of the basic questions that he posed was as follows: in the transition from the animal state to the human state, or in the shift from nature to culture; what must have changed? He hypothesised, perhaps through his reading of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, that the first (and essential) thing that changed was the establishment of an incest taboo, and thus the notion that social systems must enter into arrangements with other social systems to facilitate the exchange of women as wives. For Lévi-Strauss, the origin or core of what we can call a social structure is the fundamental basis for what generates "society" (Lévi-Strauss, 1969 [1949]). Moreover, being engaged in such an exchange presents us with the additional challenge as to how this exchange should be carried out, and for Lévi-Strauss there were two possibilities: a) what we know now as the market system and; b) the pre-market system which finds its basis on barter and gift exchange. In the latter context, there must be clear rules of reciprocity, i.e., the basic expectation of receiving something that is, more or less, equivalent to that which you gave, and here Lévi-Strauss is paying homage to Marcel Mauss's well-known paper on "the gift" (Mauss, 1990 [1923]).

Before returning to our (above) commentary on Lacan, and the inspiration he drew from this posthumously developed (and radical shift from the) Saussurean notion of structure, we will briefly conclude with the direction Lévi-Strauss's work took soon after this. Here we can illustrate more clearly that it was not de Saussure's thesis, but Jakobson's (apparently skewed) interpretation of it, in addition to his development of metaphor and metonymy, that guided Lévi-Strauss's subsequent work; a structuralism that was then brought back to France, arguably as something of a hybrid between de Saussure's thesis and cybernetic theory.

From the outset, the aim of Lévi-Strauss's early study of traditional societies and mythologies was to show that human thought is the same everywhere; that the mental processes of twentieth century man are no different to that of a tribesman in an Amazonian village, and we see this thesis borne out in his later text *La Pensée Sauvage* (Lévi-Strauss, 1962); a text that we could say is largely concerned with systems of thought. Here it seems that Lévi-Strauss sees the function of the myth as a means for people to manage questions about themselves, the world, destiny, life and death, morality and so forth. What is important is that here, as Lévi-Strauss's work evolved to *La Pensée Sauvage*, we arguably see evidence of the cybernetics within the kind of structuralism he was taking up, particularly within the subtext of Jakobson's ideas around metaphor and metonymy, and which would contribute to Lacan's theory of the signifier as structure.

Metaphor, metonymy, and transition

For Lévi-Strauss, the purpose of the myth is not simply to resolve an argument or to discover a straightforward moral or end point; instead, the myth is always part of a constellation of myths: it is an argument which is always and immediately followed by another, one which presents an alternative of the first argument and arrives at a different conclusion, which then provokes a dialogue with yet another myth, and so forth. However, as Lévi-Strauss develops this thesis on the basis of a Saussurean/Jakobsonian notion of structure, he is now slightly more rigid than both of his intellectual forerunners. For Lévi-Strauss, instead of one myth being simply followed by another in the "neutral" sense of one thing following on from another (de Saussure), the myth more specifically counters its precursor (Jakobson), and, thus, the series of myths in any society are like a hall of mirrors, reflecting each other, playing and changing, not dissimilar to the process of the metaphoric/metonymic mechanisms of language itself. There we have both the sequential ordering (the domain in which the myth, as signifier, concatenates with (or combines with/substitutes for) another myth to form the cultural syntax by which the people live). Here we see the seeds of de Saussure's conceptualisation of the system of signs as being capable of producing meaning on the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes in terms of their position and relation to one another and Jakobson's reformulation of this (qua combination and selection and metaphor and metonymy). Moreover, for Lévi-Strauss, all myths are dictated by an identical logic; they are a series of

structural oppositions and their rule-governed transformations, and that is how they play.

In other words, for Lévi-Strauss, if you take all the mythologies of the native Americas north and south, you can read them as a metonymic and metaphoric series of transformations of each other; they are positioned and related to each other, each requires the other within a system and a structure, and, thus, again, there is in a sense, nothing for nothing; each myth has its place, each myth has something to do with another myth, and taken together they comprise a single philosophy stretching across the whole of America.

To conclude, for Lévi-Strauss this scaffolding of mythology gives us an insight into the deepest ways of thinking. In other words, behind this scaffolding there must be a universal; a rule-governed process of thought that must transcend race and culture, and thus part of the essence of mankind. With this thesis, the notion of human freedom and agency is thrown into question, as it is difficult for Lévi-Strauss to argue that we are free. Instead, he believed that there is an existing symbolic system into which we are born, which is governed and structured by rules of exchange that are similar to the grammar and syntax of a language. This is something that Lacan takes inspiration from, but, again, similar to Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson, his use of de Saussure's notion of "structure" will be modified to meet with his own agenda.

Conclusion: Lacan's structuralism

We have taken a rather lengthy detour from the thesis that this paper began with concerning the intervention that Lacan made at the end of the 1950s during the Bonneval Colloquium with Jean Hyppolite (see Lacan, 2006 [1964]). The purpose of this detour was to address a certain, yet imprecise, moment in which structuralism appeared to reach a limit for Lacan's conceptual aim, a point at which point cybernetics seems to have offered a bridge for both his conceptualisation of "the subject" and his first full rendering of the Freudian unconscious.

From the general outline given of the theses of de Saussure, Jakobson, and Lévi-Strauss, and in terms of the inspiration Lacan took from these scholars, it seems that Lacan's structuralism likewise differed in a number of important ways (Lacan, 1975 [1972-1973]: 93). Taking the work of these scholars together, we could say that, for Lacan, the notion of structure, in the most abstract sense, concerns the

signifier in terms of its position and relation to other signifiers, and this seems to have guided his re-reading of Freud, i.e., a rereading in terms of the signifier as (always functioning within a) structure. However, with respect to the (time of the) unconscious, it is precisely the functioning of the signifier that is important here.

We mentioned the contrast in terms of the apparent ease with which the structuralist paradigm was incorporated into Lacan's theory, in stark comparison to the surprise with which his Seminar attendees responded to his presentation of cybernetics in 1954. However, it is likely that Lacan was not ignorant of the extent to which the structuralist paradigm was already quite heavily invested by the evolving cybernetics movement, as illustrated by the close interaction between Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss and the kind of structuralism that was brought back to France.

Indeed, considering Lacan's predilection to developing a topological model of the unconscious, importing cybernetics into his second seminar was by no means incidental, but another conceptual stepping stone towards precisely this aim. Space does not permit me to work through Lacan's rendering, and alteration of, what he called the Saussurean algorithm (i.e., de Saussure's conceptual rendering of the signifier, signified, Sign), as it would take us too far from the focus of this paper. Instead, we will briefly return to the fragment mentioned above, and focus on the consequences of the distinction he makes between the retroaction associated with language and discourse and the temporality of the signifier of the unconscious, designated by Freud with his concept of *Nachträglichkeit*. We will contextualize this distinction by concentrating on what is arguably the most important part of the fragment, i.e., where he associates *Nachträglichkeit* with the time "by which trauma becomes involved in symptoms". This time we will use Forrester's translation: "[The closing of the unconscious] also indicates the kernel of a reversible time, which is entirely necessary to introduce to account for any efficacy of discourse; it is already quite discernable in the retroaction, upon which I have for a long time now insisted, of meaning in a phrase, which requires its last word so as to be closed. *Nachträglich* (remember I was the first to unearth it from Freud's text) *nachträglich* or deferred action, in accordance with which the trauma is implicated in the symptom, displays a temporal structure of a higher order than... *the reversible time in discourse*" (Forrester, 1990: 363-364, ft.137, final italics added).

Firstly, the distinction made between the signifier of language and the signifier of the unconscious hopefully reminds us that the assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language leads to all sorts of problems if taken literally; it is precisely because the unconscious is structured by the signifier that we have the means by which trauma can be contained by the symptom, i.e., the symptom as a coagulation of signifiers. To put this another way, if Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* can be referred to as the means by which trauma is implicated in the symptom (Forrester's translation), or can become involved in the symptom (Fink's translation), it might be helpful here to replace the word "symptom" with "signifier", and thus consider the two parts of every signifier (i.e., a part that produces meaning, on the one hand, thus producing something new, and a part that does not produce meaning, but precisely blocks meaning). We could define the latter as the part of the signifier that is responsible for the (timeless) repetition of the same, as it is the part of *jouissance* that is not contained by the signifier and must insist.

Before concentrating more closely at this second temporal order, we will start by looking at how structural linguistics was useful for Lacan. Again this won't be an exhaustive account, particularly in terms of Lacan's development of, what he called, the Saussurean algorithm. Following this we will approach a definition of trauma with respect to Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, and Lacan's reformulation of this on the basis of the signifier (as functioning within) a structure. We thus start by looking at, what he describes as "the retroactive effect of meaning in sentences, meaning requiring the last word of a sentence to be sealed".

Similar to Jakobson, for Lacan, the signifying chain has both a diachronic and synchronic dimension: the diachronic dimension refers to the metonymic, word to word concatenation on the symbolic, horizontal axis. The synchronic dimension refers to the vertical axis where we find metaphor, association, and substitution. Moreover, in order for the metonymic (word to word) chain to stop momentarily, Lacan situates the *point de capiton* which could be understood as the point in the signifying chain that embraces both of these dimensions, where the metonymic meets the metaphoric. In other words, just as the signifying chain has both a diachronic and synchronic dimension so too does the *point de capiton*. The diachronic dimension of the *point de capiton* concerns the idea that discourse and communication necessitates the retroactive effect of punctuation. It is only when the sentence is complete (or punctuated) on the horizontal axis that the

meaning of the previous words (as a scaffolding of signifiers) is produced retroactively. In other words, this retroactive function is where the metonymic horizontal axis enters backwards into the metaphoric (vertical) axis, where the signifier crosses the bar into the signified, a point at which we see the signifier functioning in a specific way: it functions to the extent that it stops an "otherwise endless metonymic movement of signification" (Lacan, 1977 [1960]: 303). Here we see again how strands of both de Saussure's and Jakobson's theory are taken up, although slightly modified. The lower stave of Lacan's graph of desire is a useful diagrammatic illustration of this movement.

In sum, it is in the punctuation of the signifying chain that meaning can be produced. Prior to this, one is stuck in the time of anticipation, an endless chain of signifiers. Indeed, it is the other as listener who sanctions (retroactively) a specific meaning of an utterance. Following Lacan, this "punctuation, once inserted, fixes the meaning" (Lacan, 1977 [1953]: 99) and this is central to the structure of communication, where the sender receives his own message from the receiver, qua interpretation.

A typical example of this would be when the mother interprets the child's cry, thus determining its meaning retroactively – and – of course, this structure of punctuation is one kind of intervention the analyst may use; punctuating the speech of the analysand unexpectedly the intended meaning of the analysand's speech is altered, retroactively. "Changing the punctuation renews or upsets' the meaning that the analysand had intended, introducing new meaning to his own utterance" (*Ibid.*: 99). Punctuation, thus, "[shows] the subject that he is saying more than he thinks he is" (Lacan, 1988 [1953-1954]: 54), that something speaks through him, that the subject is spoken. Moreover, in the context of the present thesis, here the temporal aspect of language and communication cannot be distinguished from the subjective experience of time, transition, the realm of the before and after where identification and identity formation is an ongoing transitional process.

Nevertheless, for Lacan, the retroaction of meaning in a phrase, whereby meaning insists as a potential on the metonymic plane, and whereby each new term is potentially the last term in what we could call a "reading backwards" is to be distinguished from the type of retroaction conceptualized by Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* and the timeless character of (the signifier of) the unconscious.

In short, the first kind of temporality depicted in this part of the fragment concerns speech, discourse, meaning, and where structural linguistics was, to a certain extent, an interesting starting point. However, for Lacan, this was interesting only insofar as it provided the benchmark against which the temporality of the signifier of the unconscious could be deciphered, one which concerns non-meaning, the lack of meaning, and, above all, the foundation for the senseless part of the symptom.

This is where we could say that the formal mathematics of cybernetics appeared more useful in depicting the subject as spoken, as produced (or determined) by the signifier. Here, the signifier of the unconscious and its traumatic potential has a temporality of a different order, which he associates with Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*. It is this thesis, in the context of cybernetics, that we see borne out in his addendum to the "Purloined Letter" (Lacan, 2006 [1966]), i.e., the symptom as a coagulation of signifying material, the *jouissance* that is not under the primacy of the phallus.

When Freud illustrated for us what is traumatic about trauma, the traumatic part of the symptom, or any production of the unconscious for that matter, he unfortunately uses his case example of Emma (Freud, 1950c [1895]) in order to extrapolate its logic. I say "unfortunately" here because it was the "form" (*Nachträglichkeit*) over and beyond the content (Emma's complaint, distilled back to the grandiose event of sexual assault) that Freud wanted us to focus on, but the ease with which we could conflate the notion of trauma with the case-event obfuscated the entire thesis. To briefly recap on the case material (and examine the seeds of the double articulation of *Nachträglichkeit*), there we are presented with the early event of a sexual assault at age eight which is only mobilised in terms of its traumatic effect (as event) in the form of a memory, provoked by a later event at age twelve, following the intermission of puberty. In other words, the traumatic affect is connected to the earlier event at a later moment, and through deferred action (Murphy, 2013). Thus, concentrating on the form (or the internal structure) of *Nachträglichkeit* over and beyond of its content, the notion that the traumatic experience at age eight caused the symptom at age twelve has no grounds. In other words, the conditional form: "if A then B" is impossible here because according to *Nachträglichkeit*, isolating and describing A "is entirely dependent upon the prior isolation, description and occurrence" (Forrester, 1990: 208) of B. The form to which Freud referred could arguably be summarized as follows: the

repressed and the return of the repressed coalesce in one moment, and requires (at least) two moments for trauma to be traumatic. Before this, the event, as such, cannot be qualified as traumatic.

What is important here is that the logic (or structure) of trauma is paralleled in such "events" as the bungled action, the slip of the tongue, or the dream etc. Thus, trauma, as it is involved in symptoms, or the signifier, is equally evidenced in productions of the unconscious that permeate the psychopathology of everyday life. In other words, a trauma, as "event", will have been traumatic at a certain time depending on its signifying inscription. For Freud, the production of the unconscious, i.e., the dream, the bungled action, the symptom, is the time of trauma, and this, not by association with meaning, but precisely its non-meaning; the slip of the tongue and its emergence within meaning, as nonsense. Here an unexpected signifier breaks through on the first level of speech, where meaning is anticipated and produced retroactively. With the lapsus, the subject is presented with something else, a new sense is produced (a nonsense), the order of something else is woken up, *nachträglich*. Following this logic, trauma does not have to be a grandiose event, the structure of trauma can be found in the lapsus, or, indeed, the misunderstanding.

In this context, and in simple terms, one definition of trauma could be Freud's famous metaphor that man is not the master of his own house, which from a Lacanian perspective could be translated the signifier is not master of *jouissance* – the signifier is repeated through the subject because it is charged with *jouissance* and that is the reason it repeats, i.e., the *jouissance* implied in the signifier (in every signifier) is the engine of its potential return, as accidental. In sum, the logic of trauma is that it is the second (or third) event that bestows the traumatic quality to the first, *nachträglich*. Without the second time, the first time has not (yet) been a trauma.

Part of the Freudian thesis that Lacan communicates in this fragment is that the unconscious, as representational system, and inaugurated qua the inscription of a signifier, is marked by a temporality distinct from the linearity we associate with language. It is characterized by a temporality that is counter to all intuitive or common sense understanding and the cybernetics within structuralism facilitated the thesis, as we see borne out as early as his second seminar (Lacan, 1991 [1954-1955]).

When Lacan introduced into his second seminar what can only be inferred as the Turing machine, followed rather effortlessly by information and communication machines, the purpose of all this was

certainly not obvious (*Ibid.*). His use of terms, such as closed circuits, feedback loops, and retroversion, was precisely the paradigm that allowed him to delineate the relation between the subject and the signifier, the distinction between the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, and, more generally, the mechanism of psychoanalytic treatment. Moreover, as I have discussed elsewhere, the concept of repetition was beginning to take on a whole new significance, and the notion of time in the unconscious was arguably the entrée to this conceptual development (Murphy, 2013).

Moreover, the cybernetics within structuralism facilitated Lacan's trajectory towards a topological rendering of this Freudian thesis: the signifier as structure is positioned and related to another signifier, or a set of signifiers, yet the temporality of the signifier is of a completely different order to that of language. Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* depicts this function or operativity, where the repressed signifier returns, annexes itself to present-day signifying material on the vertical associative axis. In his case of Emma, a repressed sexual assault at the age of eight is inscribed in the unconscious and its inscription as signifier attaches itself to a later, seemingly innocuous event qua association, bestowing the repressed event with the affect of trauma. Thus, if the trauma only becomes traumatic *Nachträglich*, we could say that in fact both events occur simultaneously. Here, due to the recursivity of the signifier and the signifying system, a system that knows no time, the repressed and the return of the repressed can be understood as one and the same thing.

This notion of recursivity in the system of signifiers means that there is a kind of functioning or operativity to the signifier over which one has no control. In this sense, the signifier works, it is constantly at work, it exerts force and has an influence or effect with respect to its position and relation to other signifiers. In this sense, if one would try to define a signifier, one could say that there is no other foundation for the signifying chain in the unconscious other than the fact that there is precisely this operativity: if the signifier stands in relation to another signifier, it points backwards and forwards along paths of possibility and impossibility (recursivity), producing precisely the nonsense that Lacan was interested in, even encouraging psychoanalysts to become practitioners of the signifier via crossword puzzles.

Cybernetics was interesting for Lacan as it deals with systems that behave in a certain way, that is, systems which go in a certain direction; cybernetics deals with the question of purposiveness, centralising the mechanism of feedback, circularity and teleology. For

Lacan, the important aspect of this purposive behaviour was this notion of directionality and, indeed, these concepts of directionality, teleology, wholeness, and closure, belong together.

Indeed, if topology would usurp the position that language had for Lacan, specifically in terms of his definition of "structure", it is because only a topological model could accommodate something of the senseless temporality of the signifier of the unconscious, an entity that is so full of tension and resistance that you can only grasp something of it to the extent that you resist everything that is in you; that is, everything that is full of comprehension. In other words, it was by means of his topological model that we could overcome the fact that it is precisely because we have already understood everything that everything is blocked.

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