

Changing the Subject

The Story Thus Far....

Let's consider what we've done in this course. We began with an examination of the ways linguists analyze language: dividing it into levels—phonetic, morphemic, syntactic, pragmatic—and describing the organization of the linguistic code at each level. We did this primarily to gain some familiarity with techniques and terminology that are borrowed from linguists by developmental psycholinguists. But we were also interested in understanding the assumptions and presuppositions that lie behind linguistics. At this juncture we also read Lakoff and Johnson's critique of mainstream—Chomskian—linguistics.

Then we turned to child language research, and we traced it historically. We started with Roger Brown's groundbreaking study of Adam, Eve and Sarah. We saw how the interest shifted from syntax alone to include the study of the semantics of early utterances. And we saw how researchers became drawn into the making of interpretations of children's speech.

We stepped back to review research on one-word utterances, and then stepped back again to consider the cognitive precursors to verbal utterances. We did this in part because the exploration of the semantics of children's early speech raised the question of where the semantic relationships apparently expressed in early talk were coming from. One possibility was that they were constructed by sensory-motor intelligence during infancy.

So we looked at Piaget's views on the relationship between language and the child's cognition. We found some agreement between Piaget's views of the kind of practical understanding the child is constructing during infancy, and the semantic relationships Brown and Bloom and other people had found in early utterances. But Piaget has things to say about a topic arguably more important to language acquisition, namely his theory that at the end of infancy the child develops the "semiotic function": the ability to form symbolic representations that show up in symbolic play, in deferred imitation, and also in the first words. We saw that although Piaget asserts that speech leads to a socialization of the child's thought, he didn't explore this in any detail.

We compared with this account the views of Vygotsky on the relationship of thinking and speech. We saw that there's some debate over the similarities and differences between Piaget and Vygotsky. And we saw that Vygotsky's critique of Piaget is not entirely accurate. But there seems to be a genuine difference: Vygotsky describes language as transforming the child's thought.

Piaget seems to view the formation of an inner, mental realm, and the consequent use of mental representations, as a logically necessary outcome of sensory-motor development. Yet his explanation remains somewhat mysterious.

Vygotsky also writes of “interiorization,” but he suggests that *cultural* factors play a role in the formation of this inner realm. However, he doesn’t seem to have a complete explanation, either.

Interestingly, both Piaget and Vygotsky have been said to have uncritically adopted traditional linguistic notions (Piaget by Elizabeth Bates, Vygotsky by Leiman).

With Piaget and Vygotsky we were seeking to answer the question of what makes it possible for the child to talk. It’s generally assumed that language is a system of representation—if so, when and how does the child become able to form and use representations? (Or perhaps this is the wrong way to think about language? Should we, for example, consider it as a system of public rather than mental representations: *Darstellung* rather than *Vorstellung*?)

Next we turned at the social precursors to language—to “intersubjectivity” (both primary and secondary), nonverbal communication, and gesture. Bruner suggests that “formats” are preverbal language games that provide the child with a LASS: a language acquisition support system. I mentioned the “British strategy” (Trevorthen, Lock, Bruner, and others) that suggests that what enables children to intentionally communicate with other people is the fact that adults interpret their actions, gestures and vocalizations *as if* they were deliberate.

We returned to a diagnosis of the philosophical assumptions that underlie child language research. Our discussion centered around dualism—mind, body; word, world. Are such divisions real or not? Are they philosophically defensible or not? I suggested that dualism is empirically real, but not an adequate ontological basis for a coherent philosophy. One needs a non-dualistic ontology with which one can explain how a split becomes possible.

Traditional linguistics presumes a fundamental division between language and world, and child language research has perpetuated this division. We followed Bill Hanks’ lead in looking to phenomenology to escape the division, and begin to theorize about language *in* the world. The phenomenologies of language that we examined emphasize the way a background context is always operating when we speak and understand what is said. And the way talk *constitutes* its objects.

Among other implications, there is a basis here for a very different approach to semantics—the description of what and how talk means. It would be a semantics that shows that understanding is a matter of interpretation that takes into account context, shared history, ongoing practical involvements, and makes sense of talk in a specific occasion.

We again viewed the videos of Ian (12m) and Anna (22m). Ian’s mother monitored his actions continually, anticipating his desires and acting on his behalf—holding the water bottle for him to drink, for example. She worked to direct and redirect his attention—talking on the cell phone to elicit his interest, for instance. As a result, Ian was acting within a social space that he was able to

take for granted. His mother defined a zone of security that he could explore from and return to, providing a practical basis for his activity. But his deliberate efforts to influence the people around him were rather simple—rolling a ball to them; waving and banging objects.

Anna's father also monitored her action and interpreted and anticipated her intentions and desires. Her use of verbalizations showed a degree of complexity in their interaction that was not present with Ian and his mother. Anna actively solicited her father's involvement in her activity, requesting assistance ("Daddy help!"), calling for explication ("What 'at?"). Her father didn't always understand immediately, and we witnessed some "vertical construction" (to borrow Scollon's term) in Anna's utterances, as she repeated and modified them for better comprehensibility. (We speculated that adult comprehension or misunderstanding provides a form of feedback to a child about the well-formedness of their utterances that contradicts Chomsky's assertion that children get no information about grammar from what adults say to them.)

Anna too was acting within a social context, and evidently her father was drawing upon their shared history to interpret her verbalizations and respond appropriately. Any attempt to describe and analyze these verbalizations surely needs to consider their location within an ongoing flow of joint activity, much of it nonverbal and corporeal, and also within the more extensive temporality of the child's relationship with the caregivers with whom she communicates.

Language and Ontological Change

inally our last topic. Mainstream child language research treats language as an object of knowledge, and then as a source of knowledge. That is to say, to acquire language is assumed to be a matter of coming to *know* grammar, vocabulary, and so on. Then, language is assumed to be used primarily to gain knowledge about the world.

We've already seen that the second of these presumptions is too narrow. Language is a source of knowledge, but it is also a way to constitute reality.

And some people have suggested that something more complex is going on when a child starts to talk than the first of these presumptions would have us believe. The acquisition of language, they suggest, brings about a *change* in the child.

Kieran Egan – *The Educated Mind* (1997)

Egan is working within the paradigm of cultural developmental psychology. Egan explores how each developmental stage involves a new "intellectual tool"--oral language, written language, etc. He writes of a new kind of understanding that is made possible in early childhood by oral language—"mythic

understanding." Although this is mainly an epistemological analysis, ontological change is involved too. The child knows the world differently because her relation to the world has been changed.

Early childhood is the time of what Piaget calls **preoperational intelligence**. The child is now capable of mental action, and begins to "reconstruct" [quote]. Understandably this is a mammoth task, and at this stage the child has barely begun. For Piaget, the child's new mental actions are not yet mental **operations**, for they lack key properties such as reversibility. Consequently, in early childhood we find typical "errors" in cognition... the failure to appreciate that physical properties, such as quantity, volume, and mass, are conserved during transformation.

Central to oral cultures are myths, formulaic narratives that provide a way of organizing knowledge/things/experience. Egan calls the kind of understanding that oral language supports in young children **mythic understanding**. Childhood creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature (cf. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*). It is a world that is emotional, imaginative, filled with metaphor.

Egan considers mythic understanding to have the following characteristics:

binary structuring: A / not A. This structure is not explicit, but operating outside consciousness. Good/bad, hot/ cold, human/ animal, life/ death...

fantasy: dislocation from everyday reality; playing with the binary categories.

use of abstractions.: words abstract from direct, immediate knowing. The binary oppositions are highly abstract.

metaphor: at the lemonade stand the telephone repairman asks for beer. The child replies, "Mom killed that idea!"

rhythm & narrative: rhythm & rhyme, nicknames, games, riddles, games,

images: the discovery that words can evoke images

story-structuring: the use of narrative for memorization; narratives as social charter.

"While we are, willy nilly, committed to languaged understanding, it seems to involve some loss of the instinctive, vivid, intimately participatory involvement with the natural world.... Each of us is born with a unique consciousness, with a unique 'take' on reality. Language is a conventional, shared, limiting shaper of our consciousness" (Egan, p. 67)

The obvious question here--though I know of no one who has raised it, let alone answered it--is whether the kinds of cognition Piaget found in early childhood, and especially the characteristics of preoperational intelligence that Piaget

regarded as its limitations—failure to conserve, lack of perspective taking, etc.—are rather to be seen as **properties of mythic understanding; of narrative knowing**. Are its “precausal” character, its “magical” qualities, actually the signs of narrative causation?

Narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intention, with the *trouble* that always seems to confront human plans. Narrative is organized in terms of characters, action, goals, settings, means. Narrative is always drama.

Jacques Lacan

“the man who attentively contemplates a thing, who wants to see it as it is without changing anything... forgets himself... [But] when man experiences a desire... he necessarily becomes aware of himself” (Kojève, 1947/1969, p. 37, original emphasis).

“Synthesis of Lacanian thought

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is based upon the recent discoveries of structural anthropology and linguistics.

In order to enable the reader to grasp Lacan's implicit references to these new branches of knowledge, the beginning of the present work will be devoted to the exposition of some elements of structural linguistics and anthropology.

This summary at the outset situates the position of Lacanism in relation to these young branches of the human sciences from a panoramic point of view and allows the reader to understand the reasons for an exposition of the broad outlines of linguistics.

Lacan's originality consists in having placed the Freudian theory of the unconscious on the order of the day, in having analysed it, that is, in accordance with contemporary structuralist method and having brought the light of linguistics to bear upon it.

Lacan will insist upon the fact that socio-cultural and linguistic symbolisms impose themselves with their structures as orders which have already been constituted before the infans subject makes his entry into them.

The young child's entry into the symbolic order will fashion him in accordance with the structures proper to that order: the subject will be fashioned by the Oedipus and by the structures of language.

The symbolic order of language or of social organization is an order of interdependent signs bound together by specific laws.

The register of the signifiers, as opposed to the signifieds (the concepts), rejoins the register of the signifieds only through the mediation of the whole body of signifiers. This, schematically, is the meaning we can give to the Saussurian algorithm which inaugurates linguistics:

S
s

The relationship between a signifier and its signified is effected through the mediation of the whole body of the signs of the language.

According to Lacan's theories, the presence of this mediation will have a constitutive effect for the subject.

The intimate lived experience, which may be assimilated to the signified, will be mediated in thought by the interrelations between the signifiers which will be substituted for it increasing numbers as time passes.

The subject thus finds himself caught up in an order of symbols; an essentially median order which distances him from his immediately lived truth.

In this sense, language lends itself to every trap concerning the self and the lived experience. The promptness with which the unconscious can make its appearance can thus be glimpsed. There is in fact no common measure between what is spoken and what is lived, between the true essence and the manifestation of that essence in spoken discourse. In the discourse he pronounces on himself, the subject moves progressively away from the truth of his essence. This conception will be the basis of the Lacanian interpretation of the neuroses.

Lacan is indeed a structuralist then: the unconscious is the structure hidden beneath an apparently conscious and lucid self-disposition. Lacan will add that the unconscious is structured like a language. The repressed is of the order of the signifier and the unconscious signifiers are organized in a network governed by various relationships of association, above all metaphoric and metonymic associations. With the passage of time, a complex network of signifiers has been formed between consciousness and the unconscious in accordance with a linguistic model. This is shown by analysis of the formations of the unconscious: dreams, symptoms, forgetting of names, etc.

The prohibition of incest, on the other hand, is the structure underlying the apparent organization of societies: the young child who effects his or her entry into the order of social and cultural symbolism will henceforth encounter the Oedipal problem. His or her full or partial accession to society will depend upon the solution of that problem.

The phenomenon of the Oedipus and the phenomenon of language converge to ensure that the young child becomes totally conscious of his or her autonomy as a subject and a member of society.

In general terms, the symbolic order establishes mediate relationships between things; the relationship between man and man, between self and other is mediated, that is, by a symbol. It is not immediate, direct and without an intermediary.

It is the existence of the mediator which allows everyone to register himself in his distinct subjectivity. In an immediate relationship, on the other hand, the distinction between self and other is not clear.

In the Oedipus, the child moves from an immediate, non-distanced relationship with its mother to a mediate relationship thanks to its insertions into the symbolic order of the Family. The family institution distinguishes between parents and children, giving them names and

places as singular subjects. In the Oedipus, the father plays the role of the symbolic Law which establishes the family triangle by actualizing in his person the prohibition of union with the mother.

Any serious fault in the Oedipus rivets the child to the immediate relationship, depriving it of subjectivity and rendering it incapable of making the symbolic substitution inherent in language.

Giving a name to a thing in effect presupposes that one can distinguish that thing as not being one's self, and that one therefore has at one's disposal a subjectivity and a signifier of that subjectivity.

According to Lacan, the failure of the Oedipus characterizes psychosis and differentiates it from neurosis.

Parallel to the Oedipus, the child acquires full use of language through the appropriation of the grammatical category of the 'I'. The young child, who at first designates himself by his forename followed by the third person singular of the verb, realizes in a second stage the full assumption of his personality.

Entry into the symbolic order is therefore the precondition of singularity" (Lemaire, 1970/1977, p. 6-8).

"We are born into a world of discourse, a discourse or language that precedes our birth and that will live on after our death. Long before a child is born, a place is prepared for it in its parents' linguistic universe: the parents speak of the child yet to be born, try to select the perfect name for it, prepare a room for it, and begin imagining what their lives will be like with an additional member of the household. The words they use to talk about the child have often been in use for decades, if not centuries, and the parents have generally neither defined nor redefined them despite many years of use. Those words are handed down to them by centuries of tradition: they constitute the Other of language, as Lacan can call it in French (*l'Autre du langage*), but which we may try to render as the linguistic Other, or the Other *as* language" (Fink, 1995, p. 5).

In the 1950s Lacan defined the subject as a position adopted with respect to the other as language or law. However from the 1960s, Lacan described this as *false* being; the subject as fixated.

Freud: the infant is polymorphously perverse. Socialization channels libido into specific zones—oral, anal, genital.

Lacan: "The letter kills" the body. "The body is rewritten.... physiology giving way to the signifier" (p. 12). "Our bodily pleasures all come to imply / involve a relationship to the Other."

Need (e.g. crying) inarticulate: meaning is provided by caregivers; the child does not know what it wants. Meaning is imposed by adults, on the basis of the language they speak.	--> The Other as language An intruder that transforms our wishes. That which enables us to "communicate"	--> Demand Cast in the mold of language. Articulated. Socially understandable (not always socially acceptable)
		+ Desire "exhilarating and yet contorted, contradictory, and loath to be satisfied" (p. 49)

"The Spaltung (from the German *Spalte* = split) is the division of being revealed in psychoanalysis between the self, the innermost part of the psyche, and the subject of conscious discourse, behavior and culture. This division, which for Lacan creates a hidden structure inside the subject—the unconscious—is due to the fact that discourse, or, more generally, the symbolic order 'mediates' the subjects [sic] and thus lends itself particularly well to a rapid turning away from truth" Lemaire (1970/1977, p. 67)

The symbolic "is the field, the common ground in which individuals assert themselves, oppose each other and find themselves again" (67). But "any mediate relationship imposes a rupture in the inaural continuity between self and self, self and other, self and world" (68).

Access to the symbolic requires a loss of an essential part of oneself, however, since in the symbolic the subject can be no more than represented. A symbol is of necessity different from what it represents: thus when I call myself "I" or "Martin" I become lost to myself. I am "irremediably divided," at the same time "excluded from the signifying chain and 'represented' in it" (68).

It follows that "the human being can no longer be said to be the 'cause' or 'origin' of linguistic or cultural symbolism in the sense of creating this symbolism and reducing it to being a means for his projects as an absolute master. In our societies, rich heirs to traditions and culture, modes of expression and legends, the young child submits to symbolism as a homogeneous and all-powerful mass into which he must insert himself with no hope of gaining a total mastery of it. One could say, therefore, that *the human being is an effect of the signifier rather than its cause.*" (68).

The result of this splitting is that 'consciousness and reflection are to be situated at the level of discourse, whereas the unconscious is to be placed on the side of the true subject. It also follows that, henceforth, the unconscious will be accessible only by way of a long and laborious analysis, as all the forms in which the

subject believes in all good faith that he will rejoin himself belong to the autonomous order of symbolism which holds him prisoner" (69).

The subject of the utterance is never the same as the subject of the enunciation. The (I) is never the 'I.' The subject is *concealed* in the utterance, which is to be taken as an enigma, a rebus. Yet I believe I have an identity in the symbolic, that for me (I) = 'I.' This objectification is ego. Splitting masks me from myself.

"In analysis [the subject] finds once more the alienation which made him construct his ego as another and for another" (73).

2. The Nature of Unconscious 'Thought': How the Other Half 'Thinks'

"Speaking beings, far from simply using language as a tool, are also used by language: they are playthings of language, and are duped by language" (Fink, p. 15).

Lacan too turns from natural language to formal language to describe and explain the discourse of the unconscious—to cybernetics, to the syntax of artificial language (cf. p. 16ff).

+ + - - + - - - + ++ □ 1, +- □ 2, -+ □ 2, -- □ 3
 1 2 3 2 2 3 3 2

The unconscious is structured like a language; *is* language; is a chain of signifying elements, unfolding in accordance with precise rules; expresses desires that are foreign and unassimilated.

Unconscious 'thought' processes have little to do with *meaning*, with making *sense* of the world, with signification. Mathematical symbols don't mean anything; neither do computer representations. They have truth, but no meaning (sense, or reference). This kind of structure requires no subject. Unconscious knowledge is *in the language*, in the rules. "The unconscious is not something one knows, but rather something that is known."

Essentially, Lacan is pointing out that formal symbolic systems (set theory, propositional logic), generally considered the epitome of 'rationality,' turn out to have particular 'neurotic' characteristics to them: repetition (fixation), exclusion (censorship), self-contradiction (paradox), incompleteness, and so on.

3. The Creative Function of the Word: The Symbolic and the Real

The "real" is the time *before* language; it is what is not yet symbolized. It does not *exist*: it *ex-ists* (cf. Heidegger). It has no zones, divisions or gaps; it is a continuous, undifferentiated surface: "sans fissure."

In Lacan's terminology, "existence is a product of language: language brings things into existence (makes them part of human reality), things which had no *existence* prior to being ciphered, symbolized, or put into words" (Fink, p. 25).

The symbolic can cipher the real, transforming, overwriting, reducing and erasing it:

Symbolic
Real

Language allows for displacement, substitution—the antithesis of fixation. Trauma implies fixation and blockage—the real not yet symbolized. Therapy is "dialectization" of the real.

But there is also a real *generated* by the symbolic—"after the letter." This is what *cannot* be said or written: the unspeakable.

"Garbled speech and conflated words bring us closer to the 'stuff' of language than well articulated phrases, and serves as something of a bridge between the symbolic and the real" (p. 29).

Importantly, "working in isolation [i.e. by itself], the signifying chain seems to need neither a subject nor an object; but, almost in spite of itself, it produces an object and subjugates a subject" (p. 31).

But this subject is not the ego; the consciously thinking subject. The ego is a reified object, identified with ideal images that have a unified appearance (e.g. in the mirror stage). Ego is the self-image, internalized, crystallized and coherent. It is the seat of fixation and narcissistic attachment; the "I."

The mOther tongue is the basis of "ego discourse." The self, the ego, is an other.

"the subject is split—of two minds, so to speak, for an against, conscious and unconscious" (p. 40). We see this in parapraxes, but regularly in linguistics elements like *ne* (French) and *but* (English)

statement [sentence]
(enunciated)

"I cannot **but** [deny] that it would be easy."

speaking [utterance]
(enunciation)

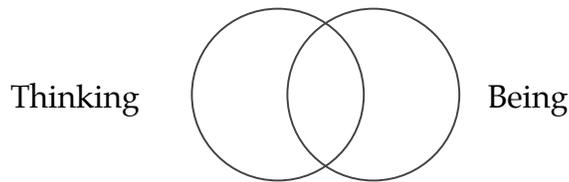
shifter; announces the unconscious subject
conscious of enunciation
subject

This subject is fleeting (not permanent; not underlying), and the signifier (*but*) *replaces* the subject; it speaks, then vanishes.

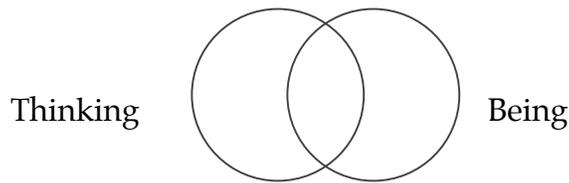
"This subject has no other being than as a break in discourse" (p. 41); fleeting, an impulse or interruption, a breach:

signifier
subject

The Cartesian subject exists at the intersection of thinking and being: “I think, therefore I am.” Lacan views this as false being, the ego.



The Lacanian subject is *either* thinking, *or* being, but never both. $\sim T \vee \sim B$



The subject *is* the split between the false sense of self, and the automatic functioning of language. It is a split subject, barred, \$

“This momentous split is a product of the functioning of language in us as we first begin to speak as children.” “Language as Other does not *automatically* make a subject of a *homo sapiens* child; it can misfire, as it does in psychosis. This split is not something that can be explained in strictly linguistic or combinatory terms. It is thus in excess of structure. Though *the subject is nothing here but a split between two forms of otherness*—the ego as other and the unconscious as the Other’s discourse—the split itself stands in excess of the Other” (46).

The subject is a surface with two sides. This split is a choice, but a forced choice, necessary to avoid psychosis. And, furthermore, the subject, alienated, is able to go beyond the division (48).

5. The Subject and the Other’s Desire

But alienation doesn’t give rise to the being of the subject; merely to the *possibility* of being, to “a place where one might expect to find a subject, but which nevertheless remains empty” (52)... “the subject’s first guise is this very lack.”

“In alienation the speaking being emerges and is forced to give up something as he or she comes to be in language” (99). That ‘something’ is *jouissance*. “A certain *jouissance* that is ‘squeezed’ out of the body is refound in speech.... Stated differently, it is only insofar as we alienate ourselves in the Other and enlist ourselves in support of the Other’s discourse that we can share some of the *jouissance* circulating in the Other.... [O]ur advent as speaking beings creates a loss, and that loss is at the center of civilization and culture.”

Fink explains: “Why would a child ever bother to learn to speak if all of its needs were anticipated, if its caretakers fed it, changed it, adjusted the temperature, and so on before it even had a chance to feel hunger, wetness, cold, or any other discomfort? Or if the breast or the bottle were always immediately placed in the mouth as soon as it began to cry? If nourishment were never missing, if the desired warmth is never lacking, why would the child take the trouble to speak?” (p. 103).

Fink quotes Lacan at this point, though the point Lacan makes is surely different in its emphasis: “What is most anxiety provoking for the child is when the relationship through which it comes to be—on the basis of the lack, which makes it desire—is most perturbed; when there is no possibility of lack, when its mother is constantly on its back.”

Lack has for Lacan “an ontological status: it is the first step beyond nothingness.” It is the null element in set theory—the empty set, not the same as no set at all. This (empty) place is defined in, and by, the symbolic order.

I see two connections here. One is to Ian, whose mother *did* anticipate his intentions and desires, and who *didn't* need to speak.

The other connection is with Hegel, brought to France by Kojève, who emphasized that we become aware of ourselves only when we lack, when we desire. Kojève interpreted Hegel in this way: Desire, especially desire for recognition, creates a lack, an absence, a hole, in the human subject. And desire directed towards another person, another “greedy emptiness” (Kojève, 1947/1969, p. 40) seeks recognition that gives not just consciousness of self but self-consciousness. It is desire for the other's desire (i.e., it is lack of being what the other lacks) that makes us human. Since human identity is achieved in practical activity, in desire and often in struggle, this identity is not simply equality with itself but “negating-negativity.” Human being is becoming—striving to be what it is not (yet).

I believe that Hegel was the source for Lacan (perhaps for Freud) of the notion that lack, and desire, bring the subject into being.

Questions

Why the phallus? This is Freud, not Hegel. The phallus becomes “signifier of the Other's desire”; that's to say, it comes to stand for whatever the Other (especially the mother) desires *other* than the child. “In its quest for love and attention, a child is sooner or later confronted with the fact that it is not its parents' sole object of interest.... All objects or activities which attract their attention away from the child take on an importance they might otherwise never have had. *Not surprisingly*, one signifier comes to signify that part of the parents' desire which goes beyond the child (and by extension, their desire in general). Lacan refers to it as the ‘signifier or desire’.” (p. 101. Emphasis added).

Now we can, if we agree with Hegel, see how the child would be fascinated by adults' desires and feel the lack of being their sole object of desire. Even how this lack would be signified in some way. But *the phallus* as this signifier? I've placed "Not surprisingly" in italics in the above quotation because I think it hides some sleight of hand. We need a theory of the Oedipal complex here. At we have to confront the troublesome fact that this occurs at around 4 or 5 years of age, by which time language acquisition is pretty much over.

Fink suggests that what Lacan refers to by "castration" is "limit, lack, loss"; that "Lacan's notion of castration focuses essentially on the renunciation of jouissance and not on the penis" (p. 99).

What we seem to have is a rereading of Freud that interprets as *symbolic* things that Freud seems to have meant literally. Castration anxiety, the renunciation of the mother, sublimation are here recast as a loss of pleasure, separation from the other, and a particular kind of (signifying) involvement in the newly-recognized world of others.

But with this kind of reading, do arguably-real events like the mirror stage and the oedipal conflict lose any explanatory value? They become metaphors for a process that is much broader—and earlier in time. What do we gain when to talk about 'lack' and 'desire' we add 'phallus' and 'castration'?

Neurotic Language. Do natural languages also have the 'neurotic' problems that Lacan finds in formal languages? Perhaps he believes that if he can show that formal languages have such problems—languages that by design have been clarified, simplified, regularized, formalized—then, a fortiori, natural languages must have them too.

Lacan seems to describe the symbolic *both* as bringing things into *flux*, and *fixing* things by dividing them up.

Julia Kristeva—*Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974/1984)

Kristeva enters the ring punching. In the *Prolegomenon* her opponents are those "necrophiliacs" who would rather study the dead products of discourse rather than the live process itself. They are guilty of a double failure: their "leisurely cogitation removed from historical turmoil" is thinking only about a "sleeping body—a body in repose, withdrawn from its socio-historical imbrication." But this failure itself points to a truth: the way modern capitalist society "represses" bodily process: specifically "the generating of signification."

Language and the Cartesian subject—"who defines his being through thought or language"—are merely moments of this process; fragments which science, even human science, looks at individually, never seeking to grasp their "interdependence or inception."

Kristeva aims to give a “material foundation” to “dialectical logic,” drawing on recent developments of Freudian psychoanalytic theory: by “rationalizing the signifying process as it is practiced within texts.” She promises that such an approach will expose the “crisis” of the current social order.

Literature—the “text”—is a kind of discourse that, more than the mere “testimony of a withdrawn body,” involves “the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction—productive violence, in short.” It brings revolutionary change to the subject. It is this literary practice—defined broadly to include schizophrenia, magic, shamanism, the esoteric, carnival, poetry—that interests Kristeva. She considers it an “unlimited and unbounded generating process.” She calls it “signifiante.”

In the first section of her book Kristeva describes the child’s movement from one to a second “modality” of the signifying process, in its development from the **semiotic** to the **symbolic**.

The semiotic is the *chora*, articulated but not structured; a mode of process, rhythm & rhyme. (Music is a nonverbal signifying system based entirely on the semiotic.) The semiotic is the modality of primary process, of the drives. It is a time of nondifferentiation from the mother, whose replete body is the source of the infant’s gratifications and hence the focus of drives. It is not presocial, however, because the infant’s life is organized by concrete material factualities such as gender and social class.

The “chora” is “a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stages in a motility that is a full of movement as it is regulated.... an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases.” Prior to representation, the chora has a tricky relationship to representation. For example, talk both depends on the chora and refuses it; the chora can be given a topology but never formally axiomatized.

But a separation from the mother, and the formation of the Other—which occurs in concert with an understanding of Self in the mirror-stage—gives rise to the symbolic: to representation; to signification. The symbolic begins with the mirror stage (6 to 18m) and ends with the resolution of the Oedipal conflict.

Kristeva cites Piaget and there do seem to be some parallels between her views and his. The semiotic would correspond to Piaget’s sensorimotor: a prerepresentational time, with space not yet organized systematically, and self not differentiated from object or other. But there’s at least one important difference: Piaget sees representation as what makes object permanence possible (by enabling the child to represent the absent object and hence manipulate it mentally, internally). While Kristeva has things the other way round?

[Note also that Kristeva refers to infancy as a time of preverbal “concrete operations,” which of course is wrong. Perhaps this is a translation error, possibly a mistranslation of “practical operations”—though Piaget wouldn’t call

the schemas of infancy “operations.” If Kristeva has indeed confused the sensory-motor stage with the concrete operational stage than she hasn’t understood Piaget very well.]

The symbolic is a time of division: of self from (M)other, and of signifier from signified. (Kristeva translates *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* as “meaning” and “signification” respectively.) In the passage from the semiotic to the symbolic the subject is formed. Signification requires a subject, adopting a position, “thetic,” that’s to say, forming propositions (which Kristeva says even holophrastic utterances do). In the semiotic this subject didn’t yet exist.

Holophrastic utterances “separate an object from the subject, and attribute to it a semiotic fragment, which thereby becomes a signifier” (p. 43). “Woof-woof” amounts to an attribution, a positing of identity or difference, the nucleus of judgment or proposition.

Kristeva asks how the thetic arises, and replies that it “is a stage attained under certain precise conditions during the signifying process, and that it constitutes the subject without being reduced to his process precisely because it is the threshold of language.” In particular, she continues (following Lacan), the thetic phase is apparent “at two points: the mirror stage and the ‘discovery’ of castration.” The first separates the child from his image, fragmenting him in the face of this unitary representation. The “imaged ego” is posited, and this makes possible the positing of objects, they too are “separate and signifiable.” The child’s first utterances are made at this age (6m-18m). “Language learning can therefore be thought of as an acute and dramatic confrontation between positing-separating-identifying and the motility of the semiotic *chora*.”

Castration “puts the finishing touches on the process of separation”: the child now separates from dependence on the mother, “and the perception of this lack makes the phallic function a symbolic function—the symbolic function.”

So the symbolic involves a double-splitting (at least): the symbolic/semiotic split itself (since the semiotic is not replaced by the symbolic, but continues: playing the role of the unconscious to its conscious). And the subject-object split, which parallels [?] that of signifier-signified.

Unlike Piaget, Kristeva asserts that the child can become a subject only in relation to another (she claims that Hegel had made this clear). In her account the infant moves (in dialectical fashion) from merging with mother to separated from mother (as Other) and hence subject. Signification is necessary to communicate with this other. Kristeva suggests that it is possible later to *Aufheben* this division.

Kristeva sees formalist linguistics as entombing, objectifying, and hence missing the process of signification, and that of “signification” which is the continuation of the semiotic in the realm of the symbolic. It deals only with the syntactic and formal. Kristeva insists instead (like Hanks) that we must attend to the “externality” of language. She notes that some pragmatic and semantic theories

have begun to look at language in context, as does Freudian theory. As she interprets them, the latter approach attends to the semiotic, the former to the symbolic.

For the semiotic has not been entirely overcome; it recurs during this symbolic stage, erupting in fantasy, condensation, (which Kristeva speculates are innate processes), and of course metaphor and poetry. She raises the question of when these are just harmless activities sanctioned by the social order, and when they are genuinely revolutionary.

Here Kristeva turns to a critique of capitalism, going beyond Lacan to draw upon Marx, locating her account of the formation of the subject within a particular historical and economic context. She proposes that the hypostatized ego (of both Chomsky and Husserl) has been created and ratified by capitalism. And it is on the same basis that she mounts an attack on Heidegger, arguing that he treated as though it were essential—and so excused—the sorry state of anxiety, longing and withdrawal that prewar capitalism had left people in.

Egan, K. (1997). The educated mind: How cognitive tools shape our understanding. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fink, B. (1995). The Lacanian subject: Between language and jouissance. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kojève, A. (1947/1969). Introduction to the reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit. (James H. Nichols, Jr., Trans.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1974/1984). Revolution in poetic language (Margaret Waller, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Lemaire, A. (1970/1977). Jacques Lacan (David Macey, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.