Naming desire

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Desire resists speech, and words are impotent to grasp it, let alone to incarnate it: incompatibility marks their relation — not a good partnership, not a good couple, one might think. Yet, can we conceive of desire without a few words hanging around? We can think of those moments of silence that are worth thousands of speeches and conversations, as they reveal the desiring tension of a human creature. But silence misses desire unless it is preceded and succeeded by the declarations of those who desire.

The incompatibility between desire and speech that Lacan postulates in 'The Direction of the Treatment' appears to be somehow counterbalanced by naming — naming in the sense of proper naming, of assigning names that are 'proper', or markers of the presumed itinerary and direction of desire, as well as the name — or names — of the desiring subject, the one assuming responsibility for 'not giving ground in relation to desire', as the ethics of psychoanalysis requires.

The proper name has a history in philosophy and in logic, and also in psychoanalysis from the moment Lacan found in it a possible conceptual reference for clarifying the status and functions of the signifier, of the constituent elements of the unconscious itself, of the mechanism of identification and, under the heading of nomination, of the Freudian triad of inhibition, symptom and anxiety. Naming provides marks of identification that inscribe in language, and in the pragmatics of actual discourse, the singularity of objects and subjects: 'Louis Armstrong', 'Tokyo', 'Jupiter' and millions of other names designate unique human beings, cities and planets, and those names help us reasonably well to *identify* them, as we say, and not to confuse them with any other humans, cities or planets.

This concerns the distinction first formulated by G. Frege between *Sinn* ('sense') and *Bedeutung* ('reference'), or the two distinct modalities of signification or meaning (according to Frege): the first (sense) as 'the mode of presentation' (to use his terms), chosen among other possible modes of expression, that represent qualities of what one is talking about; whereas the second (reference) designates directly 'what one is talking about', an object of the world, without the intermediation of the chain of signifiers. 'The morning star is the evening star' (Frege's repeatedly quoted example): the sense of 'the morning star' is not the same as the sense of 'the evening star', but the reference is the same. Frege recognised that reference, which establishes a 'direct' association between a signifier and the designated object, without requiring a liaison with other signifiers, must

nevertheless be connected with other signifiers (through the type of connection usually called 'context') in order to be intelligible. If I never heard the word 'Tokyo' before, and if I now hear it all by itself, without any discursive connection, I may well have the intuition that it is a proper name, but I will not be able to decide whether it is the name of a person, a cat or a place in this planet. As a matter of fact, the word 'Tokyo' may be used to designate all those things, in which case it is its surrounding signifiers that will allow the listener (who is also a speaking being) to understand what the speaker is talking about.

But there is a complication. Frege argues that the two different expressions (or presentations), 'the morning star' and 'the evening star', have the same reference, that is, the planet Venus. A philosopher interested by ontological interrogations might question Frege's argument, and propose, among other things, that for the percipient subject 'the morning star' and 'the evening star' are not the same object, if the object is defined with due consideration given to the position of the subject for whom the object is an object, and leaving aside the facts that Venus is not a star at all, but a planet, that it is perhaps not inconsequential that it is a planet named with a 'borrowed' proper name, the name of the Roman goddess of love, desire and beauty, and that in ancient times the morning star was not regarded as being the same thing as the evening star. 'Reference' according to Frege implies the 'objectivity' of the designated object, that is, its existence independently of any subject. Quine, logician and philosopher of language, objected to this notion of objectivity, and stated that what we call 'objectivity' is, in fact, intersubjectivity, that is, a conventional agreement between subjects, not a property that, in the construction of knowledge, objects would possess all by themselves.

But perhaps we can live without entering into ontological debates. As psychoanalysts, however, we are interested in getting to know what the nature of naming is, what are its causes and effects, with particular reference to the naming of desire, and it is only in this connection that I am bringing the question of the name, its linguistic status and its function in social bonds, that is, in discourse — that is, language made alive by the action of speaking beings — and, within the field of discourse, more precisely in the psychoanalytic discourse.

Lacan made use of Frege's categories. He entitled one of his essays *Die Bedeutung des Phallus*, 'The Signification of the Phallus', in which he attempted to elucidate the *reference* (*Bedeutung*) of the phallus as a signifier. Now, as Christian Fierens has pointed out in his study of *L'étourdit*, Lacan's conception of reference does not coincide with Frege's

definition (Fierens 2012). This is — I would add — because the psychoanalytic experience, being an experience of discourse in which names are used all the time, has led to questioning the 'normal' assumption that one knows what one is talking about when one engages in discourse and exercises the function of naming. The reference concerns objects — *imaginary* objects, Lacan would say; objects of perception whose existence depends on the manipulation of signifiers, which belong in an order entirely different from the *real* things to which they refer. What these objects truly *are* cannot be decided conclusively on the basis of the perceptions that they induce and the signifiers that appear to (re)present them. No matter how well we come to know objects and how appropriately we name them, what is unknown about them will always prevail.

This is pertinent to the conceptual distinction that Lacan introduced shortly after 'The Signification of the Phallus': that which exists between the object of desire, in the sense of its goal or target, and the *cause* of desire, the object *a*, which has no place in Frege's scheme. Shakespeare had a good intuition of this distinction. Says the sweet Juliet:

JULIET
'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;—
Thou art thyself though, not a Montague.
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name! (Shakespeare 1996, 2.2.79–126. 254)

And then the famous lines:

What's in a name! that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title:—Romeo, doff thy name;
And for that name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.
ROMEO I take thee at thy word:
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptised;

Henceforth I never will be Romeo. (Shakespeare 1996, 2.2.79–126. 254)

The lovers name each other in multiple ways, re-creating each other anew, as Pablo Neruda, another great poet who knew about names and naming, would say.

As psychoanalysts we are most interested by metaphoric re-creations, particularly by those induced by the equivocations of *lalangue*. Roman Jakobson had already pointed out that naming is the prototype of all metaphor in that through it a signifier substitutes for something, and the operation of substitution itself produces a surplus of signification.

But as psychoanalysts, too, we are most interested in what makes the rose smell so sweetly: the *jouissance* that, although somehow invading (as smells do) the words that (re)present it, and constituting an essential component of the operation of naming itself, ex-sists beyond names and naming.

The act of naming is a vehicle of *jouissance*: 'What is it, doctor, that has taken possession of me? Can you tell me what it is?' The analysand assumes that there is a name for everything and that everything has a name. If only he could identify and name his demons, he would be able to tame them, he believes, as the little prince of Saint-Exupéry, who was able to tame foxes and roses by creating a bond with them, that is, through discourse.

Taming the drives: that is impossible, says Freud in *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (Freud 1937). Proposing a better destiny — a destiny of *desire* — to the drives is possible within the scope of the psychoanalytic discourse. Like the little prince, who assumes responsibility for what he tames (the fox or rose), the analysand would then become fully responsible for his desire and his *jouissance*, and perhaps will not worry about naming exclusively. He only has to worry about naming himself as the author of his acts, authorising himself to act in a way that respects the others' desires and *jouissance*.

This self-authorisation concerning one's act is something that neurotics avoid. If there are analysands who pose a question ultimately concerning their *jouissance* and their desire, there are others who evade the question altogether, as they know very well that a question may have an answer, and the consequence of an answer may be an act and what an act entails: the adoption of an ethical position.

Assuming the ethical consequences of an act requires proper naming: the declaration of oneself as the author of the act. This is already something, and depending on the act it might be quite something for a good number of other people as well. But we also know that the proper name, while identifying a subject, does not signify this

subject beyond an inscription in the register of human acts. A proper name may have particular resonances — being a Capulet is not the same as being a Montague — but the speaking being is subjected to other resonances and produces other resonances, as Juliet says to Romeo.

If naming enables us to have a degree of certainty, the act itself creates uncertainty for its subject, for whom the options of desire or anguish, or both, are always open. This is consonant with desire having a cause that at best can be circumscribed but not given a proper name. When this appears to happen (when desire seems to be well presented by a name), it proves to be deceptive, as all lost causes whose emptiness is not recognised. How many times an analysand, having gained some courage and having provided himself with his best answer to a question concerning his demons, after saying 'That is it! This is what has alienated my life!' realises that 'that is not it', not completely, not decisively. Which is not to say, as Lacan put it, that interpretation is open to just any meaning: it is not, which means that there are words that are better than others as far as the truth of the matter is concerned. This is what the discovery of the unconscious finally entails: naming, including the tentative, not-all naming of desire, is a start, a necessary condition in the assumption of ethical responsibility for one's desire; but it is not a sufficient condition, as life and desire involve paradoxes that are not reducible to paradoxes as defined by logicians. The paradoxes as defined by logicians are articulated in universal or particular terms, the terms that designate logical classes and the members of classes, not singular speaking beings or singular events. Thus, Bertrand Russell could argue that there is no paradox in saying 'I am lying' because there is no real contradiction. The paradoxes interpreted by logicians involve contradictions that can be articulated in discourse, whereas the paradoxes of unconscious desire emerge when the limits of discourse have been trespassed, when the incompatibility between desire and speech reminds us of the untameable smell of a rose.

But if we can speak of 'the analyst's desire', or of 'the mother's desire', or of 'the father's desire', it is because we are also using universal categories. This is the price to pay for living in the world of language: we can only address the singular through the universality of the signifier; this is part of our obligations concerning language.

Yet in actual discourse to speak of the analyst's desire does not make sense unless the expression concerns the uniqueness of this or that analyst, not of an abstract entity. The same goes for the mother's desire, the father's desire and any other human desire. Giving those desires the names of classes of objects or events is the only way of

identifying them. But this naming is only an indication of their being, whose living existence survives, and dies, beyond the order imposed by words.

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