

Semblance and discourse

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This paper discusses the relations between the functions of the semblant and of discourse from theoretical and clinical perspectives. It examines those relations in four connections:

- 1) Play and games.
- 2) The formations of the unconscious.
- 3) Autism and the psychoses.
- 4) The position of the analyst in the analytic experience.

There are some common features concerning semblance in these four areas of research, but also interesting questions arising from their particularities.



Some definitions

I would like to discuss some specific questions that concern the function of the semblant and that have mostly arisen in my clinical experience. This means that I will not attempt to elucidate the concept of semblant as a whole, but rather consider some of its applications and the questions that in turn these applications have presented to me.

Russell Grigg's comprehensive account of the concept of semblant in Lacan's work (Grigg, 2007) shows that the term was used by Lacan in a number of connections and in different senses (and I presume that he will discuss the matter further in his paper).

For the purpose of this paper, I take *semblant* to mean, firstly, a *presentation*. The etymology of the word links it to *representation*, and not simply to *presentation*; a *representation*, that is, a substitute, something opposed to the real thing, or an appearance, rather than a reality. But I would like to emphasise that in its material aspect the semblant is a *presentation* (a *representation* is also a *presentation*, after all), that is, something that presents itself, or is presented to someone — to a subject capable of perceiving it. In our case — I mean, in the case of humans — this subject is also a speaking being, so that his or her perceptions are necessarily composed and oriented by language and discourse. I say this because, as Lacan has indicated, the

function of the semblant is abundant in Nature. There are many interesting studies on the semblant and semblance in the life of animals and plants. Some of the properties of semblance discovered in non human creatures are also present in human-made semblants, particularly in the imaginary register. As a presentation appearing to a subject's perception, its inscription in the imaginary order is an essential component of the semblant — at least, in the phenomena that I am going to discuss. It is possible to speak of semblant in reference to things of a pure symbolic nature, like formulas expressed in algebraic notation; but this side of the concept exceeds what I intend to present here.

The first acceptance that the Oxford Dictionary (the big Oxford) registers of the word *semblant* concerns the semblant as presentation. I summarise the definitions:

1. A person's outward aspect or appearance.
Esp. as betokening the thoughts, feelings, mood, disposition, etc.
The face, countenance.

But also, always within the first acceptance: With contextual implication that the appearance is deceitful or misleading. So, in this first sense, the word has come to signify different and even contradictory things: the sign or representation of personal states; the face, enigmatic or not; and a deceptive presentation.

In Spanish, the word *semblante*, whose etymology is identical to the French and English, is a rather common word that designates the face and the state of wellness or illness of its owner, particularly in expressions such as *Ese hombre tiene buen semblante* (or *mal semblante*) — “That man looks well (or ‘healthy’; or ‘he looks unhealthy’), as it can be worked out by looking at his face. The related Latin American Spanish verb *semblantear* (‘to semblant’ would be the corresponding English neologism) means ‘to look at somebody in the face in a penetrating way so as to determine his intentions’. In this case the ambiguity of the term is evident: it would not be necessary to look at the other's face in a penetrating way if his intentions were patent; the term implies that they are not.

A whole series of debates in the history of philosophy and of science has to do with this ambiguity in the sense of the words *semblant* and *semblance* as presentation: for instance, the polarities appearance versus essence; appearance versus reality; representation versus the real; semblance versus the real; and in particular, semblance versus truth. Lacan's use of the term

semblant has involved mostly the last two couples: the semblant as opposed to, or distinguished from the real, and as opposed to, or distinguished from truth — since it is not a matter of simple opposition, but rather as a contrasting distinction between the semblant on the one hand, and the real and truth, on the other.

The Oxford Dictionary recognises a second sense of *semblant* as outward appearance, ‘whether true or false’, which concerns the conceptual couples just mentioned.

In this paper I will follow the usage inscribed in the Dictionary as the third acceptance of the word, this time taken directly from the French: *To make semblant*, the Oxford reads, after the French *faire semblant*. I do not know how extended the use of the expression is in current English, but the dictionary’s definition suits our purposes very well:

To make semblant.

- a. To have or assume a (specified) expression, look, or demeanour.
- b. To show a (good or ill) countenance (to any one); to give (a person) a welcome, reception or entertainment [...].
- c. To make a show, appearance, or pretence *of*; to appear *to do* or *be* something; to seem likely, threaten, *to do*. [...]
- e. With negative (or its equivalent): Not to let one’s thoughts, feelings, etc. appear [...].

To make semblant, to pretend, is to make believe: to make somebody else believe that the semblant that one presents or states is either real or true. The question arises as to whether the subject that produces a semblant for others to believe believes it, or believes *in it* himself.

Some clinical appearances of the semblant

In the brief abstract of this paper that I prepared for the program, I listed four areas of research where the function of the semblant is significant — in my experience; others will find its importance in other areas. Those four areas are:

- 1) Play and games.
- 2) The formations of the unconscious.
- 3) Autism and the psychoses.
- 4) The position of the analyst in the analytic experience.

I will start with the third (autism and the psychoses), as there are features of the semblant in the psychopathological structures whose study, I believe, throws some light on the concept of the semblant when approached from other perspectives.

Autism is a human subjective position in which the function of the semblant is either absent or radically diminished. This is consistent with the absence of the function of the subject of the enunciation in this human condition. Autistic speech is fundamentally echolalic, manifested as either direct echolalia (the subject repeats what the other says immediately) or delayed echolalia (the subject repeats what the other said time ago, on occasions a long time ago — years ago). Echolalia results in phenomena of speech which are pathognomonic of autism, such as pronominal reversal: the subject says ‘I’ when he should be saying ‘you’; and he says ‘you’ when he should be saying ‘I’. The subject repeats the phrase or sentence uttered by the other, and the consequence is the production of bizarre effects of signification, since the fundamental function of the signifier as Lacan defined it — that of representing a subject for another signifier — is lost. In autism the subject is, literally, nowhere; nowhere represented in his own enunciations. Like everybody else, he resides in language, but he is excluded from discourse — and to be outside discourse is one of Lacan’s definitions of psychosis.

The subject of discourse

It is instructive to compare point by point the clinical findings in the psychoanalytic experience with autistic and psychotic subjects with the features of language in its constitutive, formative capacity, as presented by the linguist Émile Benveniste in his fundamental text, ‘Subjectivity in Language’. Benveniste (whose influence on the work of Lacan, in particular the Lacanian thesis on the unconscious being structured like a language, is manifest) does not employ the term *semblant*, but his study nevertheless captures *semblance* as a primordial effect of the signifier — the signifier in discourse, that is, in the pragmatics of language, or language in action, of language when it is used ‘to do things with words’, as J.L. Austin, the Oxford linguist and philosopher of language put it.

Doing things with words, the social bond that discourse is, requires that the *deictic* function be in place. Originally *deictic* means ‘demonstrative’, and in grammar designates the personal pronouns (‘I’ and ‘you’) and the demonstrative adverbs and adjectives that, as Benveniste defines them:

organize the spatial and temporal relationships around the “subject” taken as referent: “this, here, now”, and their numerous correlatives, “that, yesterday, last year, tomorrow”, etc. They have in common the feature of being defined only with respect to the instances of discourse in which they occur, that is, in dependence upon the *I* which is proclaimed in the discourse (Benveniste 1971, 226).

Discourse, or language in action, constitutive in its different forms of social bonds, is as a whole a semblant, in so far as it *presents* (introduces) reality, *pretends* to capture it truthfully, and *makes one believe* what it says. Within it, the *I* (the personal pronoun of the first person) occupies a paradigmatic position. Benveniste writes that language ‘is so organized that it permits each speaker to *appropriate to himself* an entire language by designating himself as *P* (Benveniste 1971, 226). I am tempted to say, ‘the *I*, the grammatical *I*, is the semblant *par excellence*’; but perhaps it would be better to regard it as a paradigm, one among other paradigms, as the composition of semblants and their effects are not uniform: there exists a plurality of paradigms of the semblant.

In autism, the *I* designates the subject which, strictly speaking, does not exist, and one should not be deceived by its presence in the autistic subject’s speech, as it is possible to teach the autistic subject to employ it; but it will be used mechanically, echolalically. That some autistic patients have progressed to employ the *I* as most people is also a clinical fact; but in such cases we can speak of a subjective departure from autism.

In fact, what autism shows is the absence or a severe reduction of the deictic function in all its aspects. The deictic function is normally pervasive and present in all statements except those scientific formulations (whose prototype would be algebraic notation) whose signification does not depend upon a reference to the act of enunciation, or does not depend so rigorously on that act as in ordinary discourse. ‘Meaning is usage’, says Wittgenstein: the production of meaning and the constitution of truth are strictly conditioned by the singularity of the acts of enunciation — and this is what we call ‘subjectivity’. The meaning of any statement, from ‘Let’s finish this job’, to ‘I love you’ depends on the pragmatics of discourse, that is, the timing and location of those utterances, which are acts of enunciation.

It may be possible for the autistic subject to acquire and employ correctly the words and expressions that refer to things of the world and even his spatial and temporal coordinates (‘today, last night, around the corner’); but it is virtually impossible to find autistic subjects who employ the deictic function in a way that denotes the normal recognition of subjective division

— since it is the subject's division that is at stake in expression such as 'I believe, I presume, I suppose, I conclude that', all of which imply that the speaker is not quite sure about what he is saying, or that his conclusions are open to alternative interpretations. Similarly, the autistic subject does not get the meaning of (to use Austin's terminology) *performative* utterances, such as 'I swear, I promise, I guarantee, I certify', etc., which normally represent a subject's attempt to transcend his subjective division.

In consonance with their incapacity to occupy the position of the subject of the enunciation, the autistic patients of all ages with whom I have worked for years exhibit the absence of forms of semblant that normally appear in the case of neurotic, perverse and some psychotic subjects (I will refer to the semblant in the psychoses shortly). The autistic subject does not engage in dramatic play, or any form of 'pretending', theatrical acting, or even representations of the *simulacrum* type. They are completely unable to cheat or lie. All the non autistic patients with whom I have worked are capable of cheating and lying, and all of them have done so in their analyses; but not my autistic patients. For that very reason, the whole dimension of truth is absent in autism, and the subject remains indifferent to what he himself says. Truth can only appear in the form of semblants because it can only be half-said, as Lacan puts it. It is necessarily enunciated in a fragmentary and metonymic way. Normally, the subject of discourse is represented accordingly, that is, in a fragmentary and metonymic way; so that he can be a subject of desire. This is excluded in autism, since the subject, although affected by language and inscribed in language, is radically foreclosed from discourse.

The semblant is the source and site of a *jouissance* that veils the lack of satisfaction imposed by our subjection to language. The autistic subject's *jouissance*, in the absence of semblants, is reduced to what Lacan called 'frozen signs' in his Conference of Geneva: signs (stereotypical, echolalic utterances and repetitive behaviours) that do not represent the subject, but to which the subject attaches his body so as to obtain some satisfaction.

Rosine and Robert Lefort coined a formula that characterises the three registers of the subject's experience in psychosis: hole (or deficit) of the symbolic, impoverishment of the imaginary, invasion of the real. In autism the impoverishment of the imaginary register is extreme. In the psychoses it becomes the battle-ground of the subject's struggle to remain in a world that has collapsed, as Freud characterised the moment of their onset.

There exists a rich body of psychiatric and psychoanalytic phenomenological knowledge concerning the disturbances of the function of the semblant in the psychoses. In this brief outline that I am presenting I will refer to just two sets of clinical observations.

Something peculiar occurs in the experiences that psychiatry has called depersonalisation and derealisation, common in schizophrenia. In these cases the function of the semblant has been distorted in such a way that it appears to be standing alone, opposed to nothing. A patient wakes up and is invaded by the conviction that everything is fake: the room, the furniture her children, her own body. It is all pretence; nothing really exists. The ‘fleetingly’ or ‘cursorily improvised’ little men of Schreber had a similar quality: semblances of reality in a world that has lost all reality. On occasions one gets a glimpse of the psychotic’s experience in dreams. But a hysteric who indulges in day-dreaming and gets carried away with the beauties of self-made fairy tales gets quite a fright if for any reason he is assaulted by a doubt about the existence of the world where he lives or the body that he inhabits. He believes in the world and in the body, and that is why he is able to pretend that alternative versions of both are more satisfying. But this is not so for the psychotic. For the psychotic, satisfaction is the prerogative of the Other. Semblants have nothing to hide or veil: they have become corpse-like remnants of a world that has come to a catastrophic end.

In paranoia, the function of the semblant tends to adopt the form of the megalomaniac ego, which takes the place of the whole world. Our Brazilian colleague, Antonio Quinet, has proposed that the formula of paranoia would be ‘I = The world’. When either side of the equation collapses, which inevitable tends to occur, the patient falls into the depressive hole that assumes a delusional melancholic form. The semblant, precariously maintained through the work of delusion-construction, melts down and the subject falls into a state of dereliction and despair.

The semblant and Angst

Outside the psychoses, in the neuroses, in the common experience of *Angst*, anxiety, the function of the semblant collapses, if only momentarily or coexisting with neurotic or other methods of dealing with the overwhelming sense of helplessness that threatens the subject. Lacan’s apologue of the encounter with the gigantic praying mantis shows what happens when there is uncertainty about the semblant’s capacity to veil castration. The subject lacks the signifier that makes possible that the lack in the Other, the Other’s desire, be tolerable and even creative for the subjective himself.

A common clinical presentation in the practice of psychoanalysis with children (but not exclusively) involves the oscillation between anxiety hysteria (with or without the development of a well established phobia) and fetishism or an equivalent perverse formation, first identified and discussed by Hanns Sachs in his seminal article on the genesis of perversions (which preceded Freud's own paper on fetishism by four years). This symptomatology shows that ultimately castration always prevails, whether through pathological or more normal channels.

The joke

Lacan says that the best cure for anxiety is desire, and that is why he recommends that every analyst carry a desire in his pocket. The best symptomatic treatment against anxiety (not a permanent cure) is the only really social formation of the unconscious, the joke. Jokes are the antithesis of the phenomena that Freud studied under the heading of *Das Unheimliche*, 'The Uncanny', which is one of the best portrayals of the actual experience of anxiety.

In jokes the semblant is at its best: exquisite satisfaction, a *jouissance* that does not kill you, a momentary suspension of the oppression of the superego (which Freud studied in his paper on humour), the emergence of the benevolent face of castration, so that the subject can make of necessity a virtue — and it is all the work of just a few signifiers well put together.

The position of the analyst

Now, the analytic experience itself is meant to lead beyond the semblant, beyond the symptom, beyond the joke, beyond the father — to reach a discourse that might not be that of the semblant, as Lacan's *Seminar XVIII* tentatively proposes. The verb in the conditional of Lacan's title suggests that getting at the discourse of the unconscious as pure letters, which by themselves do not produce effects of signification — do not produce semblants — is conceivable, but requires verification, which is one of the functions of the experience of the pass.

The analyst, a product of a psychoanalysis that *might* result in the pass, or passage from the position of analysand to the position of analyst, is thus somebody prepared to lend his body and soul to act as semblant of the cause of desire, without getting carried away by the possible satisfactions that such an occupation may bring.

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This sketchy mapping of some of the questions arising from a study of the function of the semblant indicates, I hope, that we have in this topic and around it the promise of fertile lines of research.

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