

Social bonds, identity and human discourse

Leonardo S. Rodríguez

Psychoanalysis has made substantial contributions to the study of the pragmatics of language, or language in action. The analytic experience has also generated some questions that are the object of current research on discourse and its constitutive effects. The studies on language acquisition and the pragmatics of discourse, in turn, have inspired conceptual developments among psychoanalysts that have direct applications for the understanding of the social bond that the analytic discourse is, as well as other discourses. The paper will discuss these questions with particular attention to the institution of human identity and its foundations in *lalangue*.

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Human social bonds

Jacques Lacan once told his audience that his faithful dog loved him; she loved him, he said, but she did not have a transference with him: she did not take him for anyone else. For his dog, Lacan was Lacan and the one and only Lacan, not the dog's mother or father or anyone that might have become the object of the dog's affection. One could say that the dog *identified* Lacan in his uniqueness, and would make no mistake when recognising him against other human beings or objects in the world — including herself: she would identify Lacan, but she would not identify *with* Lacan, in the sense of taking herself to be the psychoanalyst whose works have occupied us for so many years. Justine, the dog, would not do what some of Lacan's analysands did: they identified *with* him and attempted to imitate him by borrowing traits of his style, his vocabulary and his modality of elocution, and even the peculiar model of shirt with an antiquated collar that he used to wear. Only human beings do these things, not dogs.

Because of their exquisite sense of smell and other perceptual abilities, dogs can identify objects in the world with extraordinary precision, and at the same time they have a sense of identity that remains stable and unproblematic, unlike humans. It is a pity that they cannot tell us their story, but it seems reasonable to deduce from observing their ways that dogs are not preoccupied by questions with which we are familiar in our work. They do not seem to ask themselves: 'Am I a female or a male dog?' Or: 'Am I dead or alive?' They also seem to be, if not happy with, at least accepting of, the sex which

Nature assigned to them, and do not expose histories of transsexualism, transvestism, gender dysphoria or crises of sexual identity; and although they seem capable of developing a sexual interest for creatures dissimilar to them — for animals of other species, including human beings — their first sexual preferences appears to be canine beings like themselves. In animals other than humans, the alterations of the sense of identity or the choice of sexual objects typical for the species appears to be the effect of unusual changes in the settings in which these phenomena occur, changes that affect the reference points in the imaginary order that regulates their existence. That is the case of the phenomena of ‘imprinting’ observed by the biologist Konrad Lorenz, or of the many examples of atypical relations established between, for instance, an emu and a bull, a peculiar romance between unlikely partners which has been documented and recorded.

Many animal species have social organisations of different kinds and develop social bonds with remarkable features of loyalty and solidarity, and characteristic affective expressions of those bonds. In the 19th century, the observation of social life in animals and humans led some authors to postulate a social instinct — until Freud questioned this notion when applied to human beings. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* he wrote:

[...] the social instinct may not be a primitive one and unsusceptible of dissection, and [...] it may be possible to discover the beginnings of its development in a narrower circle, such as that of the family (Freud 1921, 70).

From its inception, psychoanalysis has been interested in the nature of the bonds that enable the institution of social organisations, the matrix of which is, in the life of the individual, the relationship between the mother and the infant. Freud then asks, again in *Group Psychology*:

If the individuals in the group are combined into a unity, there must surely be something to unite them, and this bond might be precisely the thing that is characteristic of a group (Freud 1921, 73).

The bond that is characteristic and exclusive of human groups is *discourse*. The definition of discourse proposed by Lacan is by now probably shared by most researchers in the

disciplines that study language and its usage. For Lacan, a discourse is *a social bond inscribed in language and specified by a set of primordial statements*. The primordial statements characteristic of every discourse need not be actually uttered. They operate in an efficient way from a latent or virtual state, inscribed in the synchrony of language as it is used and affects each individual subject.

Lacan studied the primordial statements that are latent in the four discourses that he proposed; and he proposed them conceptually on the basis of one of them, that particular form of discourse that is the analytic experience: the analyst's discourse, the master's discourse, the hysteric's discourse and the discourse of the university. He referred occasionally, as extensions to his theory of the four discourses, to the discourse of science and to the discourse of the capitalist, and in different contexts to discourse in general, without specifying the type.

Lalangue

In 1971 Lacan introduced a new concept that, among other things, addresses a dimension of human discourse that had not been identified earlier in psychoanalysis and which therefore required further investigation: this is the concept of *lalangue*. As I pointed out in a previous paper, the concept of *lalangue* was 'work in progress' for Lacan, and continues to be work in progress for us.

For the purpose of this presentation, I refer to the main features of *lalangue* as Lacan considered them in his different definitions:

1. In the first place, *lalangue* as the object of linguistics (Lacan 1990, 6-10);
2. Secondly, *lalangue* as the set of inscriptions that compose the unconscious, left over by the verbal exchanges, which are of high affective significance, in which a human infant engages — typically with his/her mother (but not exclusively with her). This set of inscriptions continues to be open to new registrations throughout life (Lacan 1971; 1974; 1998, 137-144); and,
3. Finally, *lalangue* 'as the integral of the *equivokes* that have persisted throughout [a natural language's] history' (Lacan 1973, 20; 2016).

Lacan was inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of *langue*, or language as a synchronic system of phonological and grammatical rules. But Lacan subverted

Saussure's concept with his proposal of *lalangue*, as *lalangue* (as a concept) incorporates into the structure of language the experiences of *jouissance* that its usage, or language in action, generates. The dimension of *jouissance* goes beyond the field of enquiry of linguistics as a discipline, but it is required by the psychoanalytic research into the formative effects that discourse as a social bond creates. *Lalangue* is the set of inscriptions that are simultaneously the inscriptions that constitute both the foundations of the unconscious and of language at large. We see in this a convergence of Freud's metapsychological theses concerning the structural components of the unconscious (and in particular, his scheme of Letter 52 to Fliess) and what is now known about the genesis and structure of human discourse.

The gestation of the first and fundamental social bonds, whose precipitate or sediment is *lalangue*, occurs in the exchanges between infant and mother that begin in intrauterine life. If the dog has an exquisite olfactory sense that allows it to distinguish between hundreds of different substances without making mistakes, the human infant has an exquisite sensorial and motor capacity for the development of language that has no precedent in animal life. The active participation of another human being is a *sine qua non* condition for the development of such capacity. That is why Lacan preferred to speak of language *imposition*, rather than language *acquisition*, to designate the process of humanisation of the *infans* (a Latin term that means 'a child who does not speak'). Thanks to this process of imposed acquisition the human infant is able to recognise, without hesitation and without making mistakes, the voice of the mother against other voices; linguistic sounds against non-linguistic sounds; the maternal tongue (that is, the language spoken by the mother) against another languages; and grammatical structures, that is, the correct disposition of words in phrases and sentences, even before the comprehension of their meaning — all this at a remarkable early age, starting *in utero* and progressing steadily after birth, so that well before the acquisition of other skills required by the necessities of life and social demands, the child is in command of most rules of speech, language and discourse. At an age when the child still shows in his physical and psychological development that he has been born prematurely as a biologically and culturally helpless creature, he is nevertheless already a young master of language and an active contributor to human discourse.

It is striking that the universality of the maternal tongue converges with the singular, highly idiosyncratic features of the first exchanges of discourse between the infant and his/her mother that make the material basis of language and its exercise in

discourse. The specialists in the study of language acquisition have called this first form of discourse *motherese*, or *parentese*, or *baby talk*. Patricia Kuhl, one of the principal researchers in the field of language acquisition, defines *motherese* as ‘the linguistically simplified and acoustically exaggerated speech that adults universally use when speaking to infants’ (Kuhl 2010, 717). No doubt this *motherese* is imposed, as Lacan says, by the mother or whoever occupies the place of the mother and performs the function of speaking being and tutor of language for the baby. But it is interesting to note that the baby also contributes linguistically to the exchanges, and even *imposes* some terms upon his/her interlocutors, who then adopt and use the expressions coined by the infant. To speak of ‘infant’ in this context is an anachronism, as even before being in full command of the syntactic and pragmatic rules of speech, the very young child engages in conversation, and what he or she has to say is taken as speech by the human environment, not as meaningless utterances. The infant’s speech is dismissed as nonsensical only exceptionally, and typically within family constellations linked to the most serious psychopathologies (autism and early psychosis).

Infantile *lalangue* evolves into the complex forms of human discourse in which equivocation and the *jouissance* of the word and its effects are dominant: witticism, poetry, the numerous modalities of multiple meanings derived from single statements, verbal parapraxes and, in what interests us specially, the cryptic versions of discourse present in the verbal latent content of dreams, conversion symptoms, obsessions and phobias. Witticism (verbal jokes) is the only formation of the unconscious that requires a social setting and which is capable of establishing a social bond. In the other formations of the unconscious social bonds, or relations with others in which subjectivity is engaged, is represented in the fantastic constructions of dreams, the diverse parapraxes and the neurotic symptoms — in these social bonds are represented, but not actually enacted. In these constructions *jouissance* is soldered onto verbal expressions interpreted by the unconscious in highly idiosyncratic ways. But the idiosyncrasy of the unconscious use of language nevertheless retains and respects its phonological and grammatical structure, whose rules are independent from semantic contexts, which depend upon the conditions of concrete usage — ‘meaning is usage’, says Wittgenstein.

A little girl of three who suffered from severe constipation alternating with encopresis revealed the hysterical nature of her symptoms when she was discharged from hospital, after some treatment for a particularly serious episode of constipation. She then said that she had had ‘her baby’. The model for this precocious, fantastic pregnancy and

delivery of a baby was provided by the mother of her best friend, who had recently given birth to a baby in the same hospital. The equivocality of the verbal bridges underlying her conversion symptom provided the material support for it. Her idiosyncratic usage of the verbal expressions involved respected, however, the phonetic and syntactic rules of language that orient and organise the private *lalangue*. The same girl used to call me ‘The Poo Doctor’ after being told that I would fix her poo problems.

A little older, a boy whom I treated gave me a Christmas card that he designed and painted. He had a good ear for differences in accents and pronunciations, as well as a sense of humour, and so he addressed the card to ‘Dear Doctor Wogriguez’.

Another boy, brought up in maternal tongue other than English, in which the words for ‘fish’ and ‘sin’ are closely related in phonetic sound, produced for years dreams and day-dreams in which fish were engaged in all sorts of sinful activities, and in which innocent-looking fish were responsible for various transgressions.

In analysis we do not engage in conversation using *motherese* or baby talk. The pioneer of psychoanalysis with children, Melanie Klein, already wrote that the analyst’s interpretations to the child, no matter how young, have to be expressed in simple, comprehensible, but not ‘childish’ speech. On the other hand, Melanie Klein also recommended that the analyst should become acquainted with the idiosyncratic jargon, neologisms and other terms of *lalangue* that are used within the family to designate the genitals, excrement and other delicate items. Of course, she never employed the term *lalangue*, coined more than ten years after her death. It is noticeable, too, that the toddler who is increasingly enthusiastic about conversing does not employ baby talk when addressing strangers. The discourse in *motherese* that results in *lalangue* is reserved for those who share the private code, that is, the mother and those admitted to the inner circle.

Identifications and identity

From these observable phenomena we deduce that the primordial identifications, or master signifiers, become inscribed in the unconscious in the jargon of *lalangue*, then combined with the repertoire of signifiers taken from the pool of common discourse and shared with others, within and outside the family entourage. Those plural identifications are the foundation of human identity, which, in so far as it is constructed from disparate sources, is the result of subjective division. Even at the earliest stages identifications are a plurality, and they structurally impose the inconsistencies and contradictions that make of an integrated and unified identity only an ideal. Identifications, which according to Freud

can be narcissistic, hysterical or founded upon the relation with an ideal, are in tension with each other; more fundamentally, they are in tension with the *real* being of the subject that they constitute as human subject, but which escapes and resists his/her being reduced to the signifiers and body images that make the stuff of those identifications. This is the first operation of the constitution of the subject, which Lacan called *alienation*. The alienation of the human subject results from the subject's dependence on the signifier, which Lacan puts in these terms:

The effect of language is to introduce the cause into the subject. Through this effect, he is not the cause of himself: he bears within himself the worm of the cause that splits him. For his cause is the signifier, without which there would be no subject in the real (Lacan 2006 [1966], 708).

So, identifications provide the subject with an identity — an alienated one, illustrated by expressions such as 'He is like his father'; or 'Like his mother'; or 'He has come to occupy the place of his rival'; or 'I am that one in the mirror'. It is clear that he *is not* his father, his mother, his rival or his mirror image, but because he is subjected to the signifier and the narcissistic image (an image that ultimately depends on the signifier as well) he can enter into the world of discourse and play the part of his father, his mother or his rival. In the world of discourse, he *is* them *without being* them: a clear case of alienation. On the basis of the same mechanism provided by language, if he is Lacan's patient he will identify with Lacan's son and perceive him at some crucial moments as his father — something that Lacan's dog would never consider.

Now, if the human world and human identity were regulated only by the operation of alienation, the human subject would be a pure plaything of the signifier, and his/her life would be reducible to signifiers.

But there is a second operation of constitution of the subject that puts a limit to the effects of alienation and determines what the subject *is* on a different basis: this is the operation of *separation*, which involves the relation of the subject with the object that also has a *causal* function: the object *a*, or object *cause of desire*. This object *a* functions as a *separator*: it separates the subject from the signifying chain that alienates the subject in the signifier. This object is delineated and circumscribed by signifiers, but is in itself empty and non-signifiable.

The operation of separation can be considered as another form of alienation (a point underlined by Colette Soler), in that the object cause of desire, being a lost object and a pure lack, alienates the subject's being into his lack-in-being, or lack-of-being. Lacan says that separation is 'what Freud called "*Ichspaltung*", or the splitting of the subject' which, he adds, 'Freud grounds in a splitting, not of the subject, but of the object (namely, the phallic object)' (Lacan, 2006 [1966], 714). The operation of separation gives the subject another identity, an identity linked to his objects, the objects in his body and in the world that come to represent and incarnate the lost object cause of desire. These objects have privileged representatives in those around which the drives circulate: the breast, feces, the gaze, the voice. The subject alienates himself in these objects, and their derivatives, and acquires an alienated identity through them. The girl who called me 'The Poo Doctor' identified herself with poo — an identification that I have encountered in other cases of encopresis and other peculiar developments of the relations with the anal drive.

Jouissance and culture

Psychoanalysis has made a contribution to the understanding of social bonds in showing how cultural demands become subjective structures, and the malaise, or discontents, that an entire culture experiences when its living components, the speaking human beings, are subjected an excess of prohibitions or satisfactions, or combinations of both prohibitions and satisfactions. Paraphrasing the formula coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss concerning the family as an institution, which reads 'For every culture, the family is both its condition and its negation', we could propose that *lalangue*, material foundation of social bonds, constitutes both the condition and the negation of social bonds, which are the social fabric necessary for the existence of culture. As a condition of social bonds, *lalangue* represents the first socialisation of *jouissance*, the germinal cell of what is the unique characteristic of the human species: discourse, or living language. As the negation of social bonds, *lalangue* represents the insistence of human *jouissance* to have the upper hand, to subordinate the social engagement to the indestructibility of what Lacan called 'the will to *jouissance*', also present in the life of human discourse.

This dialectical opposition at the heart of *lalangue* manifests itself, at one extreme, in the enjoyment of the joke, a socialised form of subjective satisfaction; at the other extreme, in the cryptic expressions of neurotic symptoms that provide subjective satisfaction with no social links. For it is only in analysis that a symptom may, for the

first time in the neurotic's life, be made open to the socialisation of a transference relation.

It is beyond the limits of this presentation to refer to the pathology of *lalangue* present in autism and the autistic moments of the psychoses, which I have discussed in another paper.

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