

# “The Discourse of the Other: Language, the Unconscious, and the Interplay of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary in Lacanian Theory”

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the structure of the unconscious within the theoretical framework of Jacques Lacan, with particular emphasis on its linguistic organization and its role in the formation of subjectivity. Drawing upon Lacan’s foundational propositions that “the unconscious is structured like a language” and that it functions as the “discourse of the Other,” the study examines how identity and meaning are constituted within the Symbolic order. Engaging with the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, the paper highlights Lacan’s reconfiguration of the sign, particularly his privileging of the signifier, which foregrounds the instability, slippage, and continuous deferral of meaning. The study further analyzes the concept of the Mirror Stage as a formative moment in the emergence of the ego, characterized by misrecognition and imaginary identification. In addition, the paper explores the dynamic interplay between the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, demonstrating how these registers interact to shape human experience and subjectivity. It argues that while the Symbolic order structures social existence through language and norms, the Real resists symbolization, and the Imaginary mediates between them by enabling provisional forms of identification and desire. Ultimately, the paper contends that subjectivity and meaning are not fixed or stable entities but are continuously produced within shifting linguistic, cultural, and psychoanalytic frameworks. By situating the unconscious within a system of signification, Lacanian theory offers a nuanced understanding of the processes through which human identity is constructed and transformed.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Signifier, Unconscious, Symbolic Order, Imaginary, Real, Subjectivity, Lacanian Theory.

**Introduction:** The question of how subjectivity is constituted and how meaning is produced has remained central to modern psychoanalytic and linguistic theory. Within this intellectual context, the work of Jacques Lacan offers a significant reconceptualization of the relationship between language, the unconscious, and human identity. Revisiting and reinterpreting the foundational insights of Sigmund Freud, Lacan proposes that the unconscious is not a chaotic or purely instinctual domain, but rather a structured system that operates analogously to language. This theoretical shift marks a decisive departure from traditional psychoanalytic approaches and opens new avenues for understanding the formation of the subject.

Central to Lacan’s theory is the assertion that “the unconscious is structured like a language” and that it functions as the “discourse of the Other.” These propositions foreground the role of linguistic structures in shaping human experience, suggesting that meaning and identity are mediated through external symbolic systems rather than internally generated. In this regard, Lacan’s engagement with structural linguistics, particularly the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, becomes crucial. While Saussure conceptualizes language as a system of signs composed of the signifier and the signified, Lacan reconfigures this model by privileging the signifier, thereby emphasizing the instability and continuous deferral of meaning.

A further key dimension of Lacanian theory is the concept of the Mirror Stage, which describes a formative moment in early childhood when the subject identifies with its own image. This identification is marked by misrecognition, as the subject perceives a unified self that does not correspond to its fragmented internal experience. The Mirror Stage thus provides the foundation for the emergence of the ego within the realm of the Imaginary, where identity is constructed through images and identifications.

Lacan further elaborates his framework through the triadic structure of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. These registers do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact dynamically to shape human experience. The Symbolic Order, governed by language and social structures, organizes subjectivity, while the Imaginary sustains illusions of coherence and unity. In contrast, the Real resists symbolization and disrupts the stability of meaning. The interplay among these registers reveals the inherent tensions within processes of meaning-making and identity formation.

This paper aims to examine these key concepts in order to demonstrate how the unconscious, language, and symbolic structures collectively shape subjectivity. By analyzing the primacy of the signifier, the function of the Mirror Stage, and the interrelationship among the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, the study argues that identity and meaning are continuously constructed within shifting linguistic and psychoanalytic frameworks grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis and structural linguistics.

**Origin and Development of Semiotics:** The study of signification has its roots in ancient philosophical traditions, particularly in the works of the Stoics around 300 BCE, who were among the first to reflect systematically on the nature and function of signs. Subsequent schools of thought, including the Epicureans and the Skeptics, further contributed to the development of ideas related to meaning and representation. Later, thinkers such as Saint Augustine expanded these discussions by exploring the relationship between signs, language, and interpretation. In the early modern period, scholars such as J. Wilkins (1661) and George Dalgarno (1661) made significant contributions to the formulation of universal sign-systems.

However, semiotics emerged as a systematic and scientific discipline in the twentieth century through the pioneering works of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure. While Peirce developed a triadic model of the sign grounded in logic and philosophy, Saussure formulated a structuralist framework that conceptualized language as a system of signs operating within social and psychological contexts. His posthumously published work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) laid the foundation for modern semiotics by defining the sign as composed of the signifier and the signified, and by emphasizing the relational and differential nature of meaning.

Saussure's structural linguistics marked a decisive shift from traditional approaches that treated words as isolated units. Instead, language came to be understood as a structured system governed by underlying rules and relations. This theoretical development provided a crucial foundation for later thinkers, including Jacques Lacan, who extended the study of signification into the domain of psychoanalysis. Drawing upon Saussure's model, Lacan reinterprets the structure of the sign by privileging the signifier and arguing that meaning is not fixed but is continually deferred within chains of signification.

In works such as *Écrits* and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan further develops this perspective by proposing that "the unconscious is structured like a language." Through this formulation, he establishes a direct link between linguistic structures and psychic processes, demonstrating that the unconscious operates through symbolic systems analogous to language. Thus, Lacan's theory not only builds upon semiotic principles but also expands them into the psychological and cultural dimensions of human experience, particularly through the concept of the Symbolic Order, which plays a central role in shaping subjectivity.

**Lacanian Theory: Language, the Unconscious, and Signification:** In developing the theory of structural psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan reworked the linguistic insights of Ferdinand de Saussure alongside the psychoanalytic concepts of Sigmund Freud. By bringing these two intellectual traditions into dialogue, Lacan formulated a distinctive account of how the unconscious operates through language. As David Archard observes, what distinguishes Lacan from other Freudians is his linguistic reinterpretation of Freud, while what sets him apart from linguists is his psychoanalytic understanding of language (Archard, 1984, p. 60).

Lacan reinterprets Saussure's concept of the sign by foregrounding the role of the signifier while simultaneously rethinking the function of the signified within the process of signification. Although Lacan is commonly associated with the primacy of the signifier, his theoretical intervention also destabilizes the notion of a fixed signified. In this sense, the signified does not exist as a stable or self-contained entity; rather, it is continuously constituted within the differential movement of signifiers. Thus, meaning emerges not as a fixed correspondence between signifier and signified but as a dynamic and shifting process.

At the same time, Lacan revisits Freud's theory of the unconscious and reformulates it in linguistic terms. According to Lacan, the unconscious does not operate randomly; rather, it is structured like a language and functions through systems of signs and symbols. The significance of Lacan's theory lies in its ability to connect language with the unconscious, thereby rendering Freud's insights more systematic and analytically accessible. It provides a powerful framework for understanding how meaning is produced, how expression takes place, and how texts can be interpreted.

In psychoanalytic theory, the unconscious encompasses those hidden processes that influence human thought, behaviour, and consciousness. Jacques Lacan extends this notion by demonstrating that these processes are deeply structured by language and embedded within symbolic systems.

Within the domain of psychoanalytic semiotics, Lacan delineates two fundamental characteristics of the unconscious:

(I) The unconscious is structured like a language.

(II) The unconscious is the discourse of the Other.

Elaborating this theoretical position, Lacan argues that just as language is governed by the social order, the unconscious is likewise organized through the language of the Other. Human desire, in its attempt at complete self-articulation, remains inherently incomplete within the process of symbolization. Consequently, the network of signifiers through which the subject expresses itself is not self-generated but is pre-constituted and structured by the Other (Silverman, 1983, p. 170).

In other words, according to Jacques Lacan, there exists a structural affinity between the unconscious and language within the framework of psychoanalysis. From this perspective, the unconscious is structured in a manner analogous to language. It constitutes

an affective and symbolic configuration that situates the full range of unconscious operations—along with their biological and psychological foundations—within processes of linguistic meaning and communication.

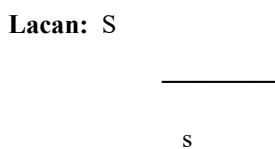
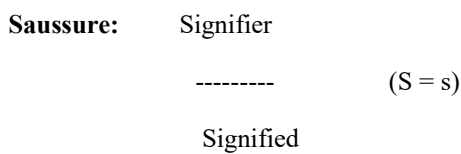
For this reason, the unconscious continuously generates formative processes that acquire meaning within socially constituted contexts, namely the domain of the Other. Consequently, Lacan transforms Sigmund Freud’s conception of the unconscious—from a domain grounded in psychophysical drives into a structurally organized, language-like system.

Jacques Lacan grounds these theoretical propositions in the concept of the sign as formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure, who defines the sign as a unity of the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept). While Lacan is generally associated with according primacy to the signifier, his reinterpretation also opens up a more complex understanding of the signified.

In this context, the signified cannot be understood as a fixed or stable entity; rather, it emerges within the dynamic process of signification. It may therefore be argued that the signified emerges through the differential movement of signifiers and participates in the continuous production of meaning. In this sense, meaning is not pre-given but is generated through the ongoing movement of signification (Lacan, 1985, p. 149).

He posits a relationship between the sign and the unconscious, thereby conceptualizing the unconscious as a process of signification. In this framework, objects and their modes of manifestation are understood to be mediated through unconscious structures. In technical terms, this formulation draws upon the theoretical frameworks of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Lacan.

Lacan represents this relationship through the formula  $S/s$ , where the signifier (S) is positioned above the signified (s), separated by a bar that indicates a structural gap. This diagram emphasizes the primacy of the signifier and suggests that meaning is not fixed but continuously deferred within chains of signification.



This diagram illustrates the theoretical distinction between the linguistic model of Ferdinand de Saussure and its psychoanalytic reformulation by Jacques Lacan.

According to Saussure, the sign is composed of two inseparable components: the signifier and the signified. Both elements exist in a relation of interdependence and together produce meaning. This relationship may be represented as a balanced structure ( $S = s$ ), in which neither element is granted priority over the other.

However, Lacan reinterprets this model by introducing a structural hierarchy. He represents the relationship as  $S/s$ , where the signifier (S) is placed above the signified (s), separated by a bar. This bar signifies a structural gap between the two elements.

In Lacan’s formulation, the signifier assumes primacy, while the signified becomes unstable and dependent. Consequently, meaning is never fully fixed; rather, it is continuously deferred through an endless chain of signifiers.

Thus, the diagram demonstrates a shift from a stable and balanced model of meaning to one that emphasizes instability, difference, and the dominance of the signifier.

Lacan appropriates several fundamental principles from the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, particularly those related to the developmental formation of the subject. However, Lacan does not merely reproduce Freud’s ideas; instead, he reinterprets them within his own theoretical framework through the concepts of the Imaginary, the Mirror Stage, and the Symbolic order.

Lacan begins his account with the earliest phase of infancy, often associated with the pre-mirror stage. He also gestures toward a pre-symbolic condition—the prenatal state—in which the child exists within the maternal body beyond conscious differentiation. At this stage, the infant may be understood as an undifferentiated being lacking a coherent sense of identity. Before birth, the child

exists in a state of unity with the maternal body; however, this unity is disrupted at birth, initiating the process of individuation. The subject is therefore constituted through separation and differentiation. (Webster, 2002, pp. 150–154)

The mirror stage, which follows the pre-mirror phase, marks a decisive moment in the formation of subjectivity. According to Lacan, this stage occurs between six and eighteen months of age (Webster, 2002, pp. 155–160). During this phase, the child encounters its reflection in the mirror and identifies with this external image. This identification is based on *méconnaissance* (misrecognition), since the child perceives the mirror image as a coherent and unified self. This process belongs to the Imaginary order, where the distinction between self and other remains unstable. Lacan argues that the child develops a sense of coherence through identification with the mirror image, thereby initiating the construction of the ego. Simultaneously, the differentiation between the self and the Other gradually emerges.

Subsequently, the subject enters the Symbolic order, which is associated with language, law, and culture. At this stage, the child becomes integrated into social structures and systems of signification. The Oedipus complex plays a significant role in facilitating the subject's entry into the symbolic realm and its acceptance of cultural norms and prohibitions. Through language and symbolic structures, the subject attempts to understand and position itself within society (Webster, 2002, pp. 161–165).

Finally, Lacan reformulates Freud's tripartite model of the psyche—id, ego, and superego—through his own triadic framework consisting of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. This reformulation reflects Lacan's broader project of interpreting psychoanalysis through the structures of language, subjectivity, and desire.

**1. The Real:** According to Jacques Lacan, the Real constitutes the domain of primal drives and experiences that resist symbolization. Language remains inherently incapable of fully representing the Real because language itself is always structured through the social order rather than through the individual subject. The Real therefore signifies a dimension of experience that exists beyond complete linguistic articulation. Although it cannot be directly expressed, it nonetheless underlies and motivates many of the subject's actions and desires. The task of psychoanalysis, therefore, is to trace the effects of this inaccessible dimension within human behavior and discourse (Lacan, 1986, p. 60).

**2. The Symbolic:** Within Lacan's theoretical framework, the early phase of his work primarily emphasized the Imaginary order and the role of images in subject formation. However, the concept of the Symbolic was formally articulated in 1953 in the "Rome Report." According to Lacan, the Symbolic order is intrinsically linked to language, social law, and cultural norms. It structures the subject's position within society by inserting the individual into systems of signification and social relations. Through linguistic and cultural structures, the Symbolic order regulates and restrains the subject's primal drives.

**3. The Imaginary:** The Imaginary order emerges during the early stage of the subject's development and is closely associated with self-recognition, identification, and narcissism. This stage is most clearly illustrated through Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage, in which the child encounters its reflection and identifies with the image presented in the mirror. Through this identification, the child begins to construct a sense of selfhood and gradually differentiates between the self and the other. The Imaginary therefore plays a crucial role in the formation of the ego and the development of subjective identity.

**Interplay of the Real, the Symbolic, the Imaginary, Subjectivity, and Aesthetics:** Within the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Real is understood as a dimension that lies beyond symbolization and linguistic representation. It does not become fully integrated into either the Symbolic or the Imaginary orders; rather, it persists as something external to and irreducible within them. The Real therefore represents the limits of meaning and articulation.

Within the domain of the Real, the subject's deepest affects and desires remain inaccessible to complete linguistic expression. Whenever the Real is mediated through the Symbolic order, a loss or distortion inevitably occurs because language can never fully capture the totality of experience. Consequently, a constitutive gap always persists between the Real and the Symbolic.

The Symbolic order is fundamentally connected to social and cultural structures. Through systems of signification, society regulates and organizes the subject's desires and drives. In mediating this relationship, the Imaginary functions as an intermediary between the Real and the Symbolic. Through images, fantasies, and identifications, the Imaginary enables aspects of the Real to be partially expressed within the structures of the Symbolic order.

For example, the Real may be associated with those dimensions of desire that resist complete symbolization, while the Imaginary provides images and fantasies through which the subject attempts to achieve fulfillment. However, because the Symbolic order continually structures and limits these desires, complete fulfillment always remains impossible. The Imaginary therefore plays an essential role in maintaining a dynamic relationship between desire and social reality.

According to Lacan, desire can never be entirely satisfied or eliminated. As a result, the Imaginary continuously generates new forms through which desire may be expressed and temporarily fulfilled. These expressions frequently appear in dreams, jokes, literature, and artistic practices.

**Conclusion:** This study has examined the relationship between language, the unconscious, and subjectivity within the theoretical framework of Jacques Lacan. By engaging with the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, the discussion has demonstrated that the unconscious is not a chaotic or purely instinctual realm but a structured system that operates according to linguistic principles.

The analysis has further shown that meaning is neither fixed nor stable; rather, it is continuously produced through the dynamic interplay of signifiers within the Symbolic order. Lacan's reformulation of the sign emphasizes the primacy of the signifier and reveals the instability and constant deferral of meaning. Consequently, subjectivity emerges not as a unified or autonomous entity but as a fragmented and continuously evolving construct shaped by linguistic and social structures.

Furthermore, the discussion has explored the significance of the Mirror Stage in the formation of the ego, demonstrating how identity is constituted through processes of misrecognition and imaginary identification. The triadic relationship between the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary has also been examined to illustrate how these registers interact in complex ways to shape human experience.

The Real, as the domain of unsymbolizable desire and experience, remains beyond complete linguistic articulation, while the Symbolic imposes structure through language, law, and social norms. The Imaginary, functioning as a mediating force, enables the partial expression of the subject's desires through images and identifications. As a result, a constitutive gap always persists between lived experience and its symbolic representation.

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