

Jacques Lacan The escaping meaning

In addition to the necessity of putting order into the medical language to permit the highest possible clarity in the communication among the professionals, there is also another need, which is about making the laymen, the “laics”, the not-specialized able to acknowledge messages and information communicated by the doctor. In these cases the doctor uses language as a fetish, as a status symbol aimed at intimidating his audience.
(Baldini, *In Praise of Obscurity and Clarity*, p.107)

It is impossible not to communicate – it is often said.

«Activity or inactivity, words or silence, they all convey a message: they influence others, and they, in turn, cannot avoid answering these communications, and end up communicating themselves. The simple fact of not talking or not paying attention to others is not an exception to what has just been asserted. The man who keeps his eyes straight ahead while having breakfast in a crowded cafeteria, or the flight passenger who is sitting with his eyes closed are both communicating that they do not want to talk with others, nor do they want others to start talking with them. The observers usually “grasp the concept” and react in an appropriate way leaving them alone. This is, obviously, a communicative exchange as well as an animated discussion.»¹

Assuming that, it is possible to accept the hypothesis that the will of being incomprehensible is also a way of communicating something.

Concerning the obscurity, Jacques Lacan shows a peculiar clarity when he says «I do not want to be understood», as many who followed his lectures and seminars confirm. He often laughs at this theme.

Therefore, which are the reasons for which Lacan does not want to be understood and plays on purpose with language pulling stunts among concepts in *calembour*, hidden quotes and interrupted trains of thought?

First of all, let's consider what Baldini says concerning the honest obscurity: «The poet and the mystic move between silence and contestation of the word, [...] they use obscurity to wake us up from the lethargy of our comfortable linguistic habits»². But not a lot is said about the obscure philosopher, except that sometimes he is forced to obscurity because of the complexity of subject.

In this case there is a clinician, a psychiatrist, an analyst who often uses – in his language – different forms of expression: graphs, tangles, diagrams, foreign languages, literary or biblical metaphors, notions from anthropology, logic, math, physiobiology, etc., all in order to compose a heterogeneous heap of instruments defining – without defining – his thought. It seems, thus, to be in presence of a linguistic composition which could be used for the art critic, but at the same time for the logic or the diagnostic.

Yet we should not forget that he who speaks is a doctor – more precisely a psychoanalyst.

With Lacan we are facing a hypertext, in which autonomous *lexia* would allow an always different reading. But a Lacanian text, as the one which is going to be examined further, is only apparently multilinear and mainly because it offers a continuous occasion of a multi-sequential reading. Actually it is monolinear, but because Lacan's style aims to produce non-sense in order to avoid the identification with the own Ego, there must be «remarks, the elliptical and elusive gait of his enunciation, briefs and suspended mentions, and most of all the convoluted structure of his sentence, of a sentence which reach a boundless extent, girdling words on words, meanings on meanings, to silently arch on the abyss of “meaning” which is beneath, this “meaning” being subject to every of

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Watzlawick, Beavin, Jackson, *Pragmatics of the human communication*, p.42

²□

Baldini, *In Praise of Obscurity and Clarity*, p. 105-106

his talk and orienting also the patient's speech (ça parle)»³.

Thus, this obscurity is not multilinear – even if it seems – and what redeems it from being dishonest concerns the content, which is clearly given, inescapable, substantial and concrete, being followed through slow and straight moving, trying not to deviate or distance – as a Sherpa would do on a mountain.

But, given the abundance of references continuously proposed by the author, the reader (or the listener) is almost instigated to multi-sequentialize his own approach to the text.

The monolinear text is consumed in a multi-sequential way because the author makes “jumps” in it. For the not-specialized reader, it is possible to begin with any individual lexia – this is what makes him feel comfortable to move freely into the book.

But why should he follow this direction? Why should a person who wants to understand Lacan's thought follow the jumping actions of the book?

The answer is in the use that Lacan makes of language, whose elaborate application prevents the average reader from approaching the text, as if it were necessary to pay an obol of clarity to obscurity in the name of comprehension. Like closing an eye to see attentively with the other one: renouncing clarity to understand more.

This denies the instructive value of Lacan's texts, because – not having a stable reading criterion – they are understandable only through interpretation. Should it be considered as an “open text”? Absolutely not. It could be “open” in the sense of a staircase, which – through the landings and the stairs themselves – links one landing to another, and one lodger to another.

Lacan refused to write in order to satisfy someone's curiosity, he only addresses to the insiders for very precise reasons.

We will be back on this topic later, it is necessary now to get straight to the heart of the matter.

The analyzed text is *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*⁴, in which Lacan argues that «the identification [of the patient's Ego] with the analyst's Ego, rethought in terms of adaptability to the environmental reality, cannot but encourage even more the cycle of specular and imaginary identifications of the subject, with effects that sometimes can touch the paranoid reaction»⁵.

As often happens during therapies, the patient tries to identify with his analyst, who is – in Lacan's terms – a “supposed-to-know subject”. With this explanation it is not assumed that the analyst is infallible, as Jacques-Alain Miller also says (Lacan's son-in-law, redactor and curator of his seminars, defined by Lacan himself as a “Plato” who seems to dictate to his beloved Socrates):

«The question “Who is supposed to know during the psychoanalytic experience?” has no simple answers. On the one hand the answer could be the patient, because it is up to him to speak. This is the reason why Lacan calls him the “analyzing one”, focusing on his activity, on his active position instead of passive [...] the person who is pretending to know is the the analyst, and this is the reason why the patient contacts him. The analyst, at the same time, does not know anything about what is happening to the patient, and if he wants to learn more he has to listen to him. The patient, then, speaks without knowing where the truth is hiding, because he ignores the value of his own words. The analyst knows that the patient knows without knowing, without being able of saying: “I know”. This is how the unconscious can be defined: a not-known knowledge.»⁶

It is precisely from this relation of “I am speaking to you, you understand what I mean, I feel that you are understanding” that the identification starts and, sometimes (without the forth moment “I understand what I am telling you and finally I know what I feel”) the phenomenon of transfer takes place.

The patient, identifying himself with his analyst, wants to know more about him, about what

³ Tarizzo, *Introduction to Lacan*, p.105-106.

⁴ Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.230.

⁵ Tarizzo, *Op. Cit.*, p. 37.

⁶ Miller, *Clarifications about Lacan*, p.178-179.

he is thinking, what he says, how he looks at life, what his passions are, and so on. But such a confidence would damage the psychoanalytic relation, due to the fact that the patient must not identify himself with any Ego, not even with his own, otherwise he would be subjected to a continuous change of behavior. This is exactly what happens when, failing the so-called “models of life”, it is easier to be victims of trends and to imitate any given person’s attitude. In Lacan’s opinion, the human being is a body-in-fragments that cyclically identifies himself with an Ego to build a unity, as a snake which decides to look for a good tailor in order to avoid changing skin.

The cycle of identifications stops in the case of an identification with an ideal, abstract world. The analyst should not be understood by his patient, in Lacan’s opinion.

And the patient must not know what the analyst is thinking about, he must not be capable of anticipating or predicting, there must not be the slightest chance of subjugation, but instead he should be vulnerable to the therapy and express himself, making the Other’s Speech resurface. Otherwise the therapy would not come to an end.

And it will end up as when Žižek went to receive Miller’s analysis: a game of mirrors where the mirrors play hide and seek⁷.

Therefore, the patient always has to feel confident about the analyst knowing the solution of his problems (the supposed-knowing, indeed), he has to confide and speak, holding a long dialogue with his analyst as well as with his own Other – the unconscious. He must listen to himself.

QUOTE A: «Whether it wishes to be an agent of healing, training, or sounding the depths, psychoanalysis has but one medium: the patient’s speech. The obviousness of this fact is no excuse for ignoring it. Now all speech calls for a response.

I will show that there is no speech without a response, even if speech meets only with silence, provided it has an auditor, and this is the heart of its function in analysis.

But if the psychoanalyst is not aware that this is how speech functions, he will experience its call all the more strongly; and if emptiness is the first thing to make itself heard in analysis, he will feel it in himself and he will seek a reality beyond speech to fill the emptiness.

This leads the analyst to analyze the subject’s behavior in order to find in it what the subject is not saying. Yet for him to get the subject to admit to the latter, he obviously has to talk about it. He thus speaks now, but his speech has become suspicious because it is merely a response to the failure of his silence, when faced with the perceived echo of his own nothingness.⁸»

A possible translation to this piece would sound as: «No matter which role we want to give to psychoanalysis, it has just one way of communication: the patient’s speech. Its evidence must not be neglected. Each speech is always communication, even if it only meets silence, as long as there is one who listens. The analyst always has to give importance to the patient’s speech, and if he refuses, sooner or later he will feel obliged to do just that. If at first he considers it as useless, then he will look for its authentic meaning. He will discover that it is a precious tool to analyze patients’ behavior and find what he hides. And the silence which preceded it assumes a different value, because it will represent the attempt to fill the emptiness», with a third less words comparing to the original text.

The complexity of the quoted text is not strictly linked to the usual reasons for which obscurity seems to be necessary, that is the inadequacy of language – as it is in Heidegger’s works. In his case, the existence of sentences as «Dasein is always already open in the emotional state as that being to which it is referred as being itself which it – in its being – has to be»⁹ depends on the necessity to express a difficult and unexplored subject. This is the reason why Being and Time would be the most famous Quasimodo after Hugo’s.

Lacan makes his speech tortuous because the speech itself is an expression of the Other: clari-

⁷ Myers, *Introduction to Žižek*, p.17.

⁸ Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 240-241

⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.167.

fying the speech would be adhering to the Ego (if you are a doctor speaking to your colleagues, then you must speak in a certain way), but this represents for him the beginning of the paranoia. The psychoanalyst must keep distanced even from his own Ego, otherwise he would not distinctly listen to his own Ego's speech, and this would make him a victim too.

Let's make the point. Lacan's obscurity aims to prevent the patient from understanding the analyst's working method, and to establish barriers which would prevent damage to the therapy. It is an obscurity due to the Other's speech, from which it is necessary not to escape in order to understand it: it has given an obol of clarity to achieve the comprehension.

This obscurity implies also a more interesting usage, close to the mystical or to the poetical spheres – the openness to interpretability.

What would happen if Lacan's text was clear and evident. If any concept was expressed with the typical clearness and stylistic appeal of Freud and Jung? The text would be monolinear. Naturally it could permit a multi-sequentialized reading, but it would also deny some possible interpretations. Indeed, each text is subjected to interpretations, but it is through the given interpretations that expresses its best vitality.

It essentially means that the lexia would disappear or that they would not be totipotent as they are now. I could not even start from where I want, to look for the meaning I want. In order to follow always new paths in the "narrative forests" it is necessary that the hypertext offers more "points of satisfaction": leaving from everywhere, arriving everywhere through a path of coherent meaning.

A branched and – sometimes – ambiguous language lends itself both to create disorder, to generate expectations and to satisfy them. To create expectations and to satisfy them means to offer a possibility of always new coherent and complete interpretations.

As Lacan says:

And moreover in fact everything which gives, as you know, its weight, its resonance, its accent to metaphysical discourse, always reposes on some ambiguity. In other words, if all the terms you make use of when you are doing metaphysics, were strictly defined, had each only a univocal signification, if the dictionary of philosophy triumphed in any way (the eternal goal of professors!) you would no longer have to do metaphysics at all, because you would no longer have anything to say. I mean that you perceive that as regards mathematics, it is much better there, one can move about signs that have a univocal sense because they do not have any. In any case, when you speak in a more or less passionate way about the relationships of the subject and the object, it is because under subject you put something other than this strict subject that I spoke to you about above and, under object, something other than the object which I have just defined as something which, at the limit, is confined to the strict equivalence of an unequivocal communication of a scientific object¹⁰.

Concerning this, Miller's observation also comforts us: «In The Direction of the Treatment, Lacan argues that there would not be psychoanalytic experience if the subject did not run at every step into the impotence of the speech, into the essential incompatibility between wish and word»¹¹.

If terms were precise, if the "narrative forest" was accessible only from one or two paths, if a criterion was given, there would not be anything to say. The speech would be dead, waiting for burial.

Lacan is not interested in a sterile specialized language, an incomprehensible jargon, or an argot which could give him prestige. He says in the text that we are examining:

QUOTE B: «The fact that we analysts are in a good position to know the power of words is no reason to emphasize the insoluble character of their power, or to "bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders" [...]. The poverty of the terms within which we try to con-

¹⁰ Lacan, *Seminar VIII*, p.162.

¹¹ Miller, *Op. Cit.*, p.246.

tain a subjective problem may thus leave a great deal to be desired to particularly exacting minds, should they compare these terms to those that structured, in their very confusion, the ancient quarrels over Nature and Grace.¹⁴ This poverty may thus leave them apprehensive as to the quality of the psychological and sociological effects they can expect from the use of these terms. And it is to be hoped that a better appreciation of the functions of the Logos will dissipate the mysteries of our fantastic charismata»¹².

It is not the author's pedestal to be at stake, but its vividness: hypertextuality gave him an eternal vivacity.

In Lacanism there is a sectarian tendency [...]. After a certain period of training it is said: "Why not me? Why cannot I become an interpreter of Lacan's thought on my own and create my own association? [...]. If we assume Lacan's text as a Bible, we can also say that in Lacanians there is a propensity toward dispersion, diversity, absence of authorized interpreters [...] I do not believe that all the interpretations are the same. In Lacan there is a struggle of interpretations, because Lacan was a man and a writer of multiple sides¹³.

Interpretations guarantee the author's pages to be never dated, which is a fear that he shows to have:

QUOTE C: «Including a whiff of enthusiasm in a written text utterly ensures that it will become dated, in the regrettable sense of the term»¹⁴.

In other words, which is the most significant effect that is obtained?

Naturally, it is the fact that a doctrine would never be organized through formulations, and also that it would never be summed up, because the continuous interpretation implies a continuous analysis and an always-fixing synthesis. But, the impact of an obscure text and the constant work of revision could push the reader to frustration at the point of making him give up with the text. This is the other genial function of this obscurity: the feeling of frustration transforms into aggression toward the author.

It was Lacan to say that, in this case, the fault is not the reader's, but the author's himself, namely Lacan. It is him to authorize the reader not to understand, in order to avoid him to feel guilty and, therefore, to make him finish the reading until he understands. To describe better this mechanism it is necessary to get back to Miller:

«Lacan defines, then, the psychoanalytical act: the analyzing [the patient] is authorized to start from the analyst, it is the analyst to give him the authorization. Thus, there is the question: "Who authorizes the analyst?", and he answers: "The analyst is authorized by himself". This sentence [...] is related to another one: "The analyzing authorizes himself starting from the analyst". This allows the patient to say: "You told me to speak". This authorization influences the free association. "As a patient, I am telling nonsenses, vulgarities, idiocies. I speak in bad terms of you, of your wife, of your sons, of your father-in-law, but it was you to ask me to speak". The authorization, which influences the free association, introduces the patient into a certain irresponsibility, allows him to say something without being responsible»¹⁵.

It is possible that the reader, as well as the patient, does not understand this text: the fault is Lacan's, therefore he has no necessity to feel guilty and frustrated and can peacefully continue to deal with it.

The obscurity is also an "alibi", making the author use the language he wants without fearing

¹² □ Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 256-257.

¹³ □ Miller, *Op. Cit.*, p.49-50.

¹⁴ □ Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.223.

¹⁵ □ Miller, *Op. Cit.*, p.179.

to distance the public he is interested in.

To summarize, in terms of this honest obscurity, it is possible to say that:

1. it is essential to the psychoanalytical treatment given the fact that, otherwise, the patient would not be free anymore to say what he feels, and therapy could not work well;
2. it allows the unconscious or, in Lacan's terms, the Other to express without censorships, without need to be adequate to an Ego, be it patient's or analyst's;
3. it makes possible a continuous interpretability, therefore a continuous studying and a constant adjustment of text onto contingencies;
4. it allows the reader to lay the blame of every difficulty of comprehension (linked perhaps to a thematic complexity or to previously explained reasons) on the author and to continue reading without worries nor frustrations;
5. relying on scientific languages or concepts far from the proper psychoanalysis, it allows Lacan not to be present in the text, "to get out of the way", giving it a sort of alterity, contributing to deny any identification¹⁶;
6. it does not look for a fake prestige in terms of highly specialized lexicon.

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should deal with.

Almost a disappearance for aphanisis with which Derrida's accusation of fallogocentrism