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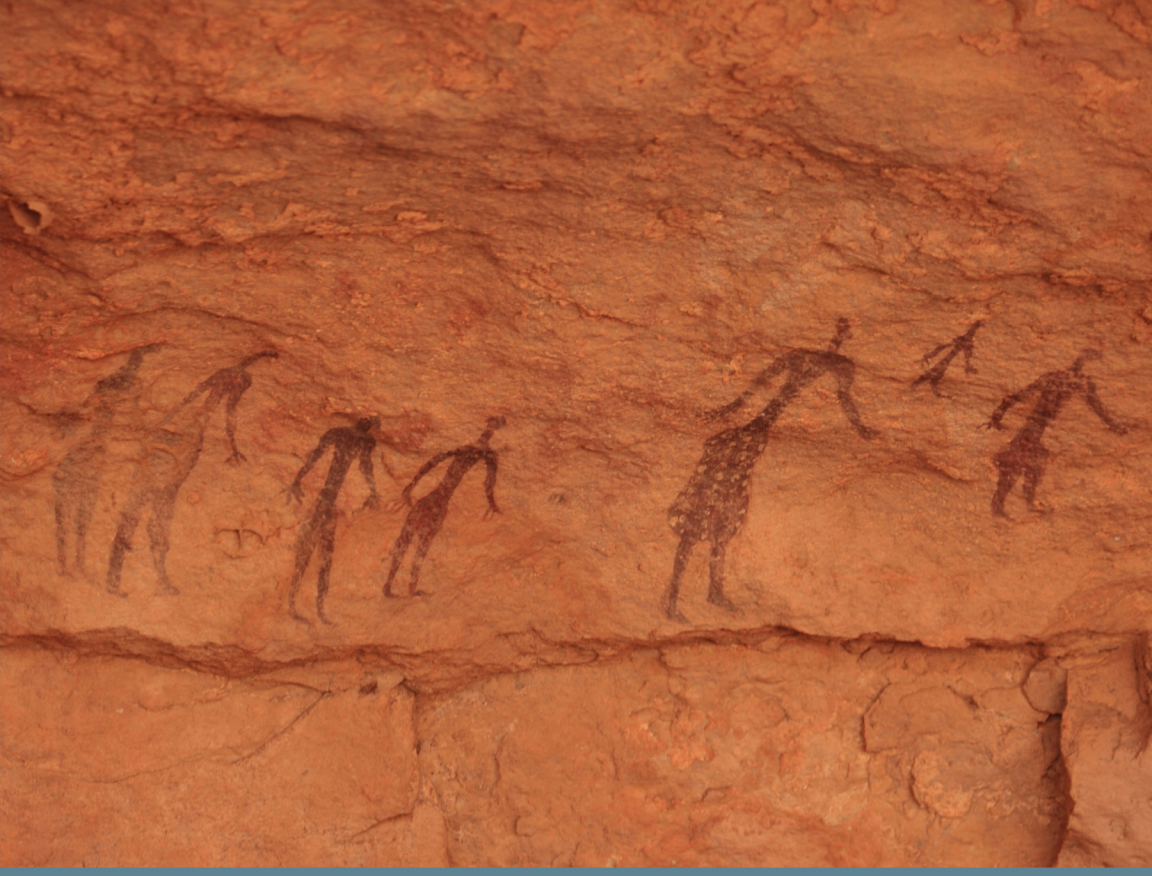

LINGUISTICS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON LANGUAGE PROCESSING AND EVOLUTION

THOMAS PAUL BONFIGLIO

ROUTLEDGE

LINGUISTICS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

This groundbreaking, provocative book presents an overview of research at the disciplinary intersection of psychoanalysis and linguistics.

Understanding that linguistic activity, to a great extent, takes place in unconscious cognition, Thomas Paul Bonfiglio systematically demonstrates how fundamental psychoanalytic mechanisms—such as displacement, condensation, overdetermination, and repetition—have been absent in the history of linguistic inquiry, and explains how these mechanisms can illuminate the understanding of the grammatical structure, evolution, acquisition, and processing of language. Reexamining popular misunderstandings of psychoanalysis along the way, Bonfiglio further proposes a new theoretical configuration of language and expertly sets the future agenda on this subject with new conceptual paradigms for research and teaching.

This will be an invaluable, fascinating resource for advanced students and scholars of theoretical and applied linguistics, the cognitive-behavioral sciences, metaphor studies, humor studies and play theory, anthropology, and beyond.

Thomas Paul Bonfiglio is Professor of Literature and Linguistics, William Judson Gaines Chair in Modern Foreign Languages, and Coordinator of the Linguistics program at the University of Richmond, USA. He has written a number of books, including *The Psychopathology of American Capitalism*; *Why is English Literature?: Language and Letters for the Twenty-First Century*; *Mother Tongues and Nations: The Invention of the Native Speaker*; and *Race and the Rise of Standard American*.

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LINGUISTICS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

A New Perspective on Language Processing and Evolution

Thomas Paul Bonfiglio

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INTRODUCTION

Toward a new transformational model of language

Theoretical outline

The postwar American quantitative/empirical turn in the social sciences largely marginalized psychoanalytic theory from the field of linguistic research. This study demonstrates the value of psychoanalysis for the science of language. It shows how psychoanalysis can illuminate the evolution, acquisition, and processing of language—especially as concerns the transition from ideation to spoken language—and reveals the primacy of parapraxes (speech errors) in that transition. It shows how the master mechanisms of psychoanalytic theory—displacement, condensation, overdetermination, secondary revision, inversion, repression, projection, and parapraxes—can illuminate the development of language and its cognitive aspects in its phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and semantic manifestations (among others), as well as the critical period for language acquisition.

Psychoanalysis is largely misunderstood in American scholarship, and in the popular sphere, as well. And for this study, there is one fundamental aspect of psychoanalysis that is little known: that it presents a linguistic configuration of consciousness and the unconscious, especially as concerns the transition from the latter to the former. For Freud, becoming conscious involves putting thought impressions into language; indeed, consciousness itself is constituted in and through language; we are fully conscious of something when we speak of it. Most of our mental functioning, however, takes place on either an unconscious or preconscious level, and these levels are transitional—there is no clear distinction among them. So it is with the evolution and processing of language—it is transitional and transformational.

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One of the most influential works by Freud is *Die Traumdeutung* (1900) (*The Interpretation of Dreams*), which he considered to be his most important work. It has had wide-ranging influence in hermeneutics and semiotics in general. The work is arguably most foundational for the development of his theories. It explains the generation and interpretation of images in dreams, especially as these relate to their mediation in and through language. The structure informing dream generation and interpretation is fundamentally transformational—there is a transition from infrastructure to superstructure, which Freud characterizes as one from the latent to the manifest. This is fundamentally a transformation from unconscious to conscious processes upon a fluid continuum with no sharp boundaries. At the conscious end of the process lies the interpretation of the dream itself, where the subject attempts to understand the dream and to describe it. At the other end lie the unconscious processes that construct the dream and slowly progress along the continuum of unconscious–preconscious–conscious processes (Freud, 1923). And the preconscious, a transitory state between the unconscious and the conscious, is where language becomes first formulated.

The transformations along the continuum of unconscious–preconscious–conscious are presented as "the same subject matter in two different languages" (Freud, 1900, p. 311). The transformation is one of words and images into rebuses (picture puzzles), much as one sees in children's games, where, e.g., the image of an eye stands for the first-person pronoun "I". The transformations take place in a multivalent interconnectivity of word and image and are constructed by two master mechanisms: condensation (*Verdichtung*) and displacement (*Verschiebung*), which correspond to the mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy, respectively. Images and words in dreams undergo considerable combination and compression into nodal points that allude to the structure as a whole. At the same time, the dream becomes differently centered—displaced into another narrative. It will be shown in the course of this study that these mechanisms—condensation (metaphor) and displacement (metonymy)—constitute the foundation of language and thought. Freud emphasizes, however, that "we are dealing with an unconscious process of thought, which may easily be different from what we perceive during purposive reflection accompanied by consciousness" (315).

Roman Jakobson emphasized the polarity and tension between the metaphoric and the metonymic, between the symbolic and the contiguous. Referring to Freud's theories, he saw symbolism as metaphoric, and displacement and condensation as metonymic:

> A competition between both devices, metonymic and metaphoric, is manifest in any symbolic process, either intrapersonal or social, thus in an inquiry into the structure of dreams, the decisive question is whether

> the symbols and the temporal sequences used are based on contiguity (Freud's metonymic 'displacement' and synecdochic 'condensation') or on similarity (Freud's 'identification and symbolism').
>
> *(Jakobson & Halle, 1956, pp. 80–81)*

And on discussing aphasia, he held that "metaphor is alien to the similarity disorder, and metonymy to the contiguity disorder" (76). He notes:

> From the two polar figures of speech, metaphor and metonymy, the latter, based on contiguity, is widely employed by aphasics whose selective capacities have been affected. Fork is substituted for knife, table for lamp, smoke for pipe, eat for toaster…phrases like 'knife and fork', 'table lamp', 'to smoke a pipe', induced the metonymies.
>
> *(69)*

It should be noted that such substitutions, in their non-pathological form, are common in adult speech, thus demonstrating an intrusion of unconscious precognitive structures into adult language.

These observations by Jakobson tie together many fundamental questions pertaining to the phenomenon of language and its relation to psychoanalytic theory, especially dream theory. Research on these interconnections became gradually sidelined in the decades since Jakobson outlined them. This study will explain and revisit these interconnections.

Language is generated unconsciously—we know that. And its final formulation in structured conscious articulation occurs at the end of a gradual transition that begins in unconscious processes. It is important to emphasize that consciousness itself is a transitory phenomenon. In *Das Ich und das Es* (1923) (*The Ego and the Id*), Freud held that

> being conscious is in the first place a purely descriptive term connected to the most immediate and most certain perceptions. Experience shows us that a psychical element—a representation (*Vorstellung*), for example—, is not, in normal circumstances, continuously conscious. A major characteristic of the state of consciousness is that it passes quickly. The now conscious representation is not there a moment later.
>
> *(Freud, 1923, pp. 3–4)*

Thus it is with language. We start developing language at an infantile state, in which we are as yet conscious of very little.

This model of the psyche is non-modular. This study does not see the unfolding of language as an automatic assembly of discrete entities hierarchically arranged, nor as a sequence of algorithms. It is not at all unconscious in

that sense. It is a collage of interconnected multivalent processes. And most importantly, the generation of language is never separate from the psychological moment.

In his investigation of the two principles of mental functioning, Freud said,

> Thinking was probably unconscious in origin, which is to say that it went beyond mere representation, became directed to the relations between impressions of objects, and acquired further qualities perceptible to consciousness only when it became connected to verbal residues.
>
> *(Freud, 1911, pp. 233–234)*

Thus consciousness rests upon the recall of linguistic elements. It is important to note that the notion of a relation between impressions of objects and verbal residues is structurally similar to Saussure's view of the relation between a concept and a sound image, and not between the word and the thing in itself. Freud, however, takes this several steps further in relating it to the emergence of conscious awareness.

Wilson and Weinstein revisit the work of Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) in their article "Language, Thought, and Interiorization. A Vygotskian and Psychoanalytic Perspective". They observe that, for Vygotsky, "thought is not expressed but completed in the word…before a thought can reach its fully formulated state, a person must go back and forth between thought and word searching for the proper articulation" (Wilson & Weinstein, 1992, p. 26). And in this process, the utterance traverses networks of associations on its way to expression. The authors claim that this goes on "outside of awareness" (26). The sense of a word "is the aggregate of all the psychological facts emerging in our consciousness because of this word. Therefore, the sense of a word always turns out to be a dynamic, flowing, complex formation which has several zones of differential stability" (31). Language is thus processed here in a multivalent way via chains of associations. This can be compared with Freud's placement of language processing along the continuum from the unconscious to consciousness as linguistic. The authors note that Vygotsky also surpassed the old binary distinction of thought vs. language, which got stuck in a chicken or egg debate, when he proposed that "meaning is created by the unification of speech and thought" (28).

The authors also observe that for Freud, when the word gets attached to a visual representation of an object, this constitutes the transition from the unconscious to consciousness, and that the separation of the representation of the word from its object is what constitutes repression and the resultant neurosis. In other words, consciousness is eclipsed by the corresponding repression of language.

Unconscious processes are illogical, contradictory, and often absurd, but they, nonetheless, constitute the bulk of mental activity. The mechanisms of displacement and condensation are subject to repetition and overdetermination,

a term that Freud used to describe their interrelations with diverse mental functions. This derives from his profession as a neurologist and his view of the plasticity of the brain. This study will demonstrate the presence of displacement, condensation, and overdetermination in linguistic and cognitive processes.

The unconscious is a collection of things that are not part of consciousness. They are repressed, blotted out, and excluded by the defense mechanisms of denial, displacement, inversion, projection, transference, and so on. But the repressed eventually passes into wakefulness; this causes us to slip, to blunder, to misspeak, to misperceive: These are the famous "Freudian slips". They also appear in jokes, which often pretend to be innocent. The repressed is always present in varying degrees of partial and often total eclipse, but there nonetheless, and its emergence into observable behavior is determined by psychoanalytic mechanisms (condensation, displacement, overdetermination, etc.).

It is common knowledge that evolutionary theory has met with much public resistance in the United States. In *Ever Since Darwin*, Steven J. Gould asks, "Why has Darwin been so hard to grasp"?, to which he adds: "The basis of natural selection is simplicity itself". He summarizes:

> Organisms vary, and these variations are inherited (at least in part) by their offspring.
>
> Organisms produce far more offspring than can possibly survive.
>
> On average, offspring that vary most strongly in directions favored by the environment will survive and propagate. Favorable variation will therefor accumulate in populations by natural selection.
>
> *(Gould, 1977, p. 11)*

Perhaps the resistance to Darwin may lie in the fact that he insisted that humans are animals.

One may ask a similar question of Freud. He invokes Darwin as the greatest single influence on the development of his theories, and he also views humans as animals. Repressed animals. It is also common knowledge that Freudian theory has met with much resistance in the United States, as well. Why do his theories continually meet with denial? His view is also quite simple:

- humans are animals
- animals do not repress their instincts
- humans need to repress their instincts in order to construct civilization
- this repression causes the instincts to become expressed in deformed modes of behavior

Language is the articulation of those repressions. In *Early Social Interaction*, Michael Forrester holds that "when you learn how to talk, you learn how to repress" (Forrester, 2015, p. 65).

Freud's theories have received their widest reception in English translations that were done in the first half of the twentieth century. As such, the translations are frequently antiquated. They have also been occasionally altered in the transition into the grammar of English. One major example concerns the English phrase "the unconscious", which gives an erroneous impression of a location or container. This misprision is explained in Chapter 7. For the sake of more current and accurate versions, all translations from French, German, Italian, and Latin are my own.

Chapter summaries

Chapter 1 studies the contributions of Michel Bréal in his *Essaie de sémantique* (1897). A contemporary of Freud, Bréal offers what could have contributed to a psychoanalytic science of language, one that configures language in opposition to a system of formal logic. It also studies the views of Julia Kristeva on the possibilities of combining psychoanalysis and the linguistic science of the second half of the twentieth century.

Chapter 2 examines the concept of recursion as formulated by the theory of universal grammar. It shows how recursion, and the related concept of merge, are insufficient models for an understanding of language; recursive reflection is limited to four or maximum five levels of embedding in the acquisition, production, and processing of speech. The chapter also demonstrates that recursion and metacognition are homologous constructs.

Chapter 3 studies the work of the Swiss linguist Jean Piaget and his understanding of language development in children. It shows the similarity between Piaget's stages of language development, especially as these concern the transition from the preoperational to the fully operational, and Freud's model of the progression from unconscious, to preconscious, to conscious instantiations of language. It is demonstrated that these transitions are fluid and not clearly demarcated, and that earlier precognitive modes remain present in adult language and thought.

Chapter 4 studies the mechanisms of dreamwork—the construction of dreams—and how these mechanisms can account for the emergence of language, consciousness, and cognition. It continues the discussion of precognitive and preoperational modes in the development of the child's conception of language and thought and relates these to the mechanisms of dreamwork, as these are present in adult narration of dreams.

Chapter 5 studies adult speech errors and shows how these are constructed by the mechanisms of dreamwork. It also studies parapraxes in general—bungled actions—in this context. It shows, as well, the structural similarities between speech errors and wit/humor along the sequence conscious—preconscious—consciousness.

Chapter 6 situates the production of language within the dynamics of ego formation, i.e., of the articulation of identity. It is demonstrated that speech is co-articulated by images of self, especially in the context of self vs. other, and that this co-articulation functions in the transition from preconscious to consciousness.

Chapter 7 examines the tripartite structure of language, consciousness, and identity formation within current research on neuro-psychoanalysis. It shows how the primacy of the auditory function is more involved in the development of self-consciousness than is the visual function, and that self-consciousness develops in dialog with the vocalizations of authority and prestige figures. It also describes the emergence of syntax from the psychoanalytic process of secondary revision, and the emergence of lexica from visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and motor networks.

Chapter 8 discusses language and gestural mimesis as a symbiotic unity, and as the original point for the symbolic function. Here, self/nonself mirroring and role-reversal imitation are seen as the original point for meta-discourse. The chapter argues for a human mimetic instinct, not a language instinct. In the embodiment of gesturing in language and cognition, it is shown how gesturing is continually present, even in displaced form, i.e., from one part of the body to another. The phenomenon of conversion disorder is discussed in this context.

Chapter 9 discusses the mimetic role of mirror neurons in the embodiment of the matrix of language and thought. The subjects studied include vowel production, facial expression, the bodily self, the activation of muscle stimulation in the processes of reading and listening, the involvement of basal ganglia in the processing of syntax in a distributed (non-modular) rather than hierarchical system, and the activation of corresponding neural circuits in the brain when thinking of concepts associated with a word.

Chapter 10 discusses the theories of universal grammar, merge, and the minimalist program as improbable models for explaining the production and processing of language. It offers instead a psychoanalytic perspective in combination with current theories of cognitive grammar. Language emerges in a continual and preconscious processing via perceptions, anticipations, and perseverations involving condensation, displacement, repetition, and overdetermination. It is argued that syntax is a product of repetition and, ergo, habit.

Chapter 11 places elements of the evolution of language in a psychoanalytic perspective. It posits the development of intonation and gesture as the initial point for language and demonstrates correspondences with the psychoanalytic account of verbal parapraxes. It revisits the theories of the primal horde put forth by Darwin and Freud and coordinates these with research in linguistic anthropology that places the origin of syntax within primate male bonding and reciprocal altruism in resistance to single male dominance.

Chapter 12 places the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) within a psychoanalytic account of language and makes use of their notion of the cognitive unconscious. It shows how condensation and displacement function as ubiquitous cognitive and linguistic modes of apprehension. It includes research on embodied cognition to show how thought and language become manifested in metaphors that extend from the body, and how these aid in the consolidation of identity.

Chapter 13 introduces psychoanalytic perspectives into the discourse on linguistic relativity. It examines how words shift meaning in acts of displacement and condensation that perform the defense mechanisms of repression, sublimation, inversion, and denial. It is argued that a linguistic relativizing of the semantic shifts is strongly resisted, because it problematizes the configuration of national identity. The semantic shifts act to restrict meaning and cognition.

The glossary following the conclusion contains working definitions of the key terms: condensation, displacement, overdetermination, dreamwork, libido, id, ego, superego, repetition compulsion, unconscious, preconscious, repression, primary process, secondary process, secondary revision, parapraxis, projection, conversion disorder, and transference.

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