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# Being a sign



# THE SIGN. A LACANIAN ISSUE<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the notion of linguistic sign and the readings and uses Lacan made of it. The author proposes to examine the way Lacan uses different theories of sign, in different times and through different reformulations along his teaching. The journey begins with the notion of the linguistic sign coined by de Saussure. It is in Ferdinand de Saussure's proposal of a binary structure of the sign that Lacan finds an isomorphism between the Freudian unconscious and the structure of the signifier. Articulations with the theories of Jakobson, Peirce, Benveniste and Barthes will also be taken into consideration in order to finally show how Jacques Lacan uses the notion of sign raised by Charles S. Peirce, in his last teaching.

## KEY WORDS

sign | Lacan | Peirce | jouissance | parlêtre

*The sign is the basic notion of every science of language  
but precisely because of this importance it is one of  
the most difficult to define.*

Ducrot, O. and Todorov, 1974

**D**ucrot and Todorov in the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language* (1974), point out that classical definitions of sign are often tautological, unable to grasp its specificity. In general, we agree that every sign refers to a relation between two. But the fact of identifying the significance with the relation makes it impossible to differentiate between two planes that are very different in themselves. The authors argue that, for instance, the sign “mother”, on the one hand, is necessarily linked to the sign “child” but, on the other hand, what “mother” designates is mother and not child.

Saint Augustine proposes in one of his first theories on the sign: “A sign is something that, besides being an impression upon the senses, causes something else to bring to mind.” But *bring to mind* (or “evoke”) is a category too narrow and at the same time too broad: on the one hand, it presupposes that the meaning exists outside the sign (so that it is possible to bring it to mind) and, on the other hand, the evocation of one thing by means of another is always on the same plane (Ducrot, Todorov, 1974, p. 121)

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Now, if the sound of a siren can evoke bombing or war or anxiety or fear...would the sign be, then, something which replaces something else? Or rather, it would be a too singular substitution, since it is not possible neither on the side of meaning, nor on the side of the referent, as such, to be inserted inside a sentence instead of the word.

Maybe we could define sign, prudently, as an entity that can be made sensitive and that for a defined group of subjects indicates an absence in itself. For de Saussure, the part of the sign that can be made sensitive will be called “signifier”, and the absent part “signified”. The relationship between them, signification.

From this definition, we will find different variations of it, which in turn will be cut across, throughout the 20th century, by different theoretical, critical, and even ideological positions. This somehow inconsistent and discontinuous ground has given rise to a diverse and heterogeneous disciplinary field, characterized also by the lability of its borders, like that of Semiotics.

We note, therefore, the difficulty, if not the impossibility, to screen a concept as vast as the sign. Rather, we should be content with trying to reflect on its usefulness as an autonomous object when elaborating a theory. Its usefulness and productivity from which great thinkers and authors have been able to elaborate their own and singular episteme. Just to name some of them: Saussure, Jakobson, Peirce, Benveniste, Barthes, and, obviously, Jacques Lacan.

From this starting point, I therefore intend to show how Lacan makes use of the different theories of the sign, in their different times and reformulations throughout his teaching. In other words, retracing the concept from Lacan’s appropriation of it.

## **EARLY PERIOD. LACAN ON THE SIDE OF LINGUISTICS AND STRUCTURALISM**

From the very beginning, Lacan was interested in linguistics<sup>1</sup>, Saussurian and Post-Saussurian. However, says Milner, Lacan’s own methods (e.g. commutation, minimum pairs, etc.) will not be used by him. His statement “the unconscious is structured as a language” (Lacan, 1964 [2010], p.28) demonstrates that the unconscious has properties which are studied by linguistics, however, the processes by which these properties are established will not be what matters the most to Lacan (Milner, 2003).

This early period in Lacan begins with *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* in 1953, and it is in Ferdinand de Saussure proposal of a binary structure of the sign that Lacan finds an isomorphism between the Freudian unconscious and the structure of the signifier.

## **DE SAUSSURE**

The importance of de Saussure lies mainly in his attempt to find the fundamental principles of linguistics, principles according to which the heteroclitic mastery of language could be cleared in order to conceptualize language as a homogeneous object with the status of a scientific object. Linguistics would be the science that would address it.

de Saussure (1976) inaugurates a way of conceiving and approaching this scientific object, where the central issue is to be able to establish certain general principles that can be sustained without contradictions or ambiguities. From the Saussurian formulations the conception of linguistic fact is left aside, and the notion of “relation” gains prevalence. The conception of language as a system, as form and not substance, and of the co-determination of its elements later allows the

consolidation of the concept of structure, and although de Saussure has not used this concept in a doctrinal sense, it is contained in his original conception of language. For this author, language is essentially an instrument of communication (Ducrot and Todorov, 1974, p. 29).

Until the end of the 19th century, philosophers agreed in defining language as expression of thought, but from Saussure's contributions, this division of thought and language becomes unsustainable because language, for de Saussure, exercises an articulating function, the reciprocal demarcation of units, while it begins to be defined as an autonomous and arbitrary entity.

F. de Saussure defines the linguistic unit as a two-fold entity, comprised of two terms joined by an associative link; this postulate opposes that of language as a nomenclature that supposes already formed ideas. The linguistic sign is not the union of a thing with a name, but the bond joining a concept and an acoustic image, which he will call respectively signified and signifier, and sign, to the bond between the two (Saussure de, 1976).

This bond is strictly arbitrary, since it differentiates itself from the symbol (to which he assigns a basic principle of a natural kind between signified and signifier) and "comes from the fact" that thought, considered before language, is like an "amorphous mass" (...) suitable to all possible analyses, without favoring any over the others (...)" (Ducrot and Todorov, 1974, p. 30)

There are no reasons of a natural order for combining a certain concept with a certain acoustic image. In that sense, the arbitrariness appears as a fact that does not admit discussion. If Lacan discusses the arbitrariness of the sign, as we will see later, it is to value the fixity of the unconscious signifier (whose statute is that of writing) over the meaning.

The value of a linguistic entity is given by its opposition and relationship with the other entities of the system, its most exact characteristic is to be what others are not (Ducrot and Todorov, 1974, p. 33). The notion of value is developed in the constitutive orders of the sign: the conceptual and the material, with reference to the significant and signifier respectively (Saussure de, 1976).

For that reason, the notion of value leads us to understanding the production of meaning not as a correlation of a signifier with a significant, but as a vertical demarcation of two amorphous masses, of "two parallel floating realms" (Rifflet-Lemaire, 1971, p. 45).

Therefore, for de Saussure, language is a system of phonic and conceptual differences, where the content of a linguistic entity will only be really determined by what is outside of it. Due to the fact of being part of a system, it shows signification, but above all, it has a value. Thus, the value of a term is determined by all that surrounds it (Saussure de, 1976).

For de Saussure, language is a formal, abstract, anonymous, coercive system, social product, that makes possible speech acts or individual and concrete actions. Taking language, a social and individual fact, as object of linguistic study implied entering on a heteroclitic and indeterminate terrain, due to its multiform and heterogeneous character. The only concrete means for Saussure were languages, to access through them to the character of language in its universality, as a norm of all manifestation of language. Thus, he will consider language as a self-contained whole and as a principle of classification.

We are seeing a disaggregation of language (as a system) with respect to language, without disregarding it is an essential part of the latter, a social product that is passively registered by the individual, and which is imperative in its forms, without losing its characteristics of contract and convention. On the other hand, speech gets a secondary status, it would be an individual act of will and intelligence and, from the semantic point of view, a phenomenon subordinated to language (Saussure de, 1976).

Lacan, in his return to Freud, recognizes these developments. From the Saussurian theory, Lacan is interested in the approach language (system) disaggregated from language and as a structure comprised of differential elements, but he distances himself from Saussure, insofar as he will say that the basic unit of language is not sign but signifier, therefore, it is also the unconscious.

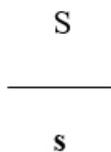
F. de Saussure had modeled the concept of linguistic sign as follows:



For de Saussure, as we said, the linguistic sign is a two-sided entity. In one side, it is placed the signified (concept), in the other and below, the signifier (acoustic image). The arrows indicate the reciprocal implication between signifier and signified. This union is stable and fixed at a synchronous level and constitute an indissoluble unit. That is why it is enclosed in an ellipse. This notion of sign rather takes into account the signified and excludes the possibility for the signifier to take its own status (Saussure de, 1976)<sup>2</sup>.

Reformulating the Saussurian formula, Lacan argues that there is an order of pure signifiers, that exist before the signified. The unconscious is structured as a language by these signifiers and their logical order. Language is not made up of signs but of signifiers, that is why he inverts the relation and places the signifiant over the signifier. The bar, which is reinforced, no longer implies union but resistance, it should be considered as a bar to be crossed because the signified must occur<sup>3</sup> (Lacan, 1955-56)

In this sense, when Lacan approaches the problem of signification, he understands that the unit is no longer the sign (e.g. a word in the dictionary) but the signifying chain that creates an effect of sense. Therefore, the signified slips under the signifier and the relationship between them is extremely unstable.



However, it is also necessary that there are points of fixation, of grappling between them, and he calls this anchorage, *point de capiton*. The quilting or *capiton* points are the places where the mattress-maker's needle has worked to prevent a mass of stuffing from moving too freely about. At these points signifier and signified are "knotted" together (Lacan, 1955-56). For Lacan, a minimum of these cushioning points are necessary so that the result is not psychosis.

It is this concept of *capiton* that takes Lacan to another linguist, Roman Jakobson, whose developments were determining as a condition of production of this Lacanian moment. From Jakobson, Lacan will conceive language as a structure and this will lead him later to propose his thesis: "the unconscious is structured as language" (1964 [2010] p. 28).

## JAKOBSON

Jakobson was a member of a group of Russian linguists who presented their first works in 1926 at the International Congress of Linguistics in The Hague, and who later formed what became known as the "Prague Linguistic Circle", from which the concept of structure would gain great relevance. These linguists favored as object of study the structure of linguistic systems and, they are mainly responsible for the dissemination of this new conception. Thus, the structural method gives priority, according to a criterion of relevance, to relations to the detriment of terms of the

relations (Sazbón, 1969).

This group also was interested, and very particularly, in continuing the development of the problems raised by de Saussure<sup>4</sup>, making some contributions such as the redefinition of the notion of phoneme (Sazbón, 1969). This is defined as the minimal differential unit of the system<sup>5</sup>, a concept that will later be used by Lacan in his essay *The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud* (1957[1988]).

Jakobson analyses the different types of opposition and the notion of correlation. From a binary logic, he maintains that analyzing every phoneme by features, every feature can be conceived as the positive or negative value of a property, thus any opposition no matter how complex it may be, is summarized in a beam of the simplest symmetries. In this sense, the law of symmetry is valid for both the simplest and the most complex, where some pairs such as code/message, metaphor/metonymy, selection/contiguity, correlation/disjunction, repeat the phonemic binary<sup>6</sup>.

Jakobson (1960 [1976]) argues there are two semantic guidelines in every discourse. A theme can follow another because of its mutual likeness or because of its contiguity. In poetry we work mainly with similarity and in prose with contiguity, that is, with metaphor and metonymy respectively. It also describes, and already in the field of language disorders, two types of aphasia. One has to do with disorder of similarity, that is, with the relations of similarity or substitution, which is the order of synonym and metaphor; and the other with the disorder of contiguity, metonymy, that is, the relations of alignment, articulation and syntactic coordination.

Lacan takes these elements in Seminar III “The Psychoses” (1955-56), in *The Instance of the Letter* (1957), and *On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis* (1957), equating metaphor to the Freudian condensation and metonymy to displacement, placing the first operation as equivalent to what the symptom does and the second one as the form in which desire is presented, which is always a desire for something else. In this sense, metonymy occurs in that it is something endless, since desire is never realized.

In 1957, in *Psychoanalysis and its Teaching*, from Jakobson, Lacan will conceive language as a structure, using the concept of metaphor in his Seminar IV *The Object Relation* (1956-67) to introduce the phrase “Paternal Metaphor” which explains the metaphorical, i.e. substitutive, character of the Oedipus Complex, while considering it a shifter<sup>7</sup>.

Lastly, at this moment Lacan equates the concept formulated by the “Prague Linguistic Circle”: *phoneme* to “letter”, as the localized structure of the signifier. He says: “By letter I designate that material support that concrete discourse borrows from language” (Lacan, 1957 [1988], p. 473). On the other hand, he had resorted to Poe’s story, *The purloined letter* (1955), to exemplify how a letter (*lettre*) passes through various hands, as a metaphor for the signifier which circulates among different subjects. A letter always arrives at its destination, and that is why the analyst must read the analysand’s speech literally. As we will see later, Lacan will later reformulate this concept of letter and propose a different definition.

## **BENVENISTE**

Another of the postulates that we can consider as condition of production of Lacan’s discourse regarding linguistics and signs, have been those of Emile Benveniste, who at the end of the 1960s raised the need for a different linguistics, presenting an original and humanist proposal. Benveniste thought of a linguistics that would study how the speaker appropriates language.

Benveniste defines semiotics as a linguistics of sign, and semantics as linguistics of enunciation. There are two different linguistics; there is a hiatus between semantics and semiotics.

For this author, the subject is constructed through language and the world, in turn, is constructed from acts of enunciation. Benveniste breaks with the idea of seeing language as an instrument separate from the human being, and word turned into an object from an instrumental or vehicular function. For this linguist, it is from language that the human being constitutes himself as a subject because “[...] just language founds reality. In *its* reality, which is that of the *being*, the concept of ego” (Benveniste, 1979, p. 83). Subjectivity is the capacity of the speaker to consider himself as a subject. Language is not possible unless each speaker puts himself as subject and refers to himself as I do in his discourse.

For Benveniste the notion of person and its psychic aspects imply a purely linguistic description. He thus places the subject at the center of great categories of language, demonstrating that this subject cannot distinguish himself from the instance of discourse, which is different from the instance of reality. That is why Barthes (1987) says that Benveniste bases linguistically, that is, scientifically, the identity of the subject and of his language.

On the other hand, Benveniste argues that language never distinguishes itself from a sociality, taking language in what Barthes (1987) calls its concomitances, that is, work, history, culture, institutions, therefore, that which constitutes human reality. These are the aspects considered determining in the identifying processes that constitute the subject. In that sense, society is precisely society because it speaks. The individual is not anterior to language but he becomes an individual insofar as he speaks. That is why Benveniste argues that there are only interlocutors.

Enunciation, for Benveniste, is putting language into function, different from enunciation. It is the renewed act by which the speaker takes possession of the language. Thus, in the enunciation there remain traces, marks of acts of enunciation and it is from processes of enunciation that statements are produced. That is why the statement is the discourse or the linguistic series, a consequence of the act of enunciation.

In this way, subjectivity leaves traces in the statement. For Benveniste these traces are, on one hand, the personal pronouns (from these depend other types of pronouns which share the same status), on the other, *deixis* indicators or deictic, demonstratives, adverbs, adjectives, which organize the spatial and temporal relations around the subject, taking it as point of reference; and lastly, verbal tenses insofar as language always distinguishes tenses, that is, past, future or present. Benveniste refers to these as “empty forms”.

However, by eliminating every reference to speech, Benveniste eliminates that which, according to Saussure, determines speech, that is, the individual. By separating the individual from the subjective, he confirms the exile of the feeling that everyone experiences of being the same; in contrast, he founds subject and subjectivity on a material base, the language uttered (Milner, 2003)

Lacan takes that in the *Seminar on the Purloined Letter* (1955 [1988]), though with certain distance, where he mentions the idea of a signifying chain, and in *De un designio* (1966). But he makes public his dissatisfaction with Benveniste’s positive and rigorous stance in *Radiophony* (Lacan, 1977 [2002]), where, Milner points out, the tone is severe. However, he had taken his notion of enunciation in 1946 in *Presentation on Psychological Causality* to describe the characteristics of psychotic language, with its “enunciation duplicity.” Later, in *Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire* (1962 [2002]), he uses the term to situate the subject of the unconscious. Thus, in his Graph of Desire (from the same text) appears enunciation as a conscious word, while referring to the “unconscious enunciation.” In this way, he argues that language comes from the Other and that the idea “I am the master of my discourse” is just an illusion.

## PEIRCE. A FIRST ENCOUNTER, FAILED

In this moment, Lacan establishes his definition for signifier: “a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier.” This formula is produced from that of Peirce when he defines sign as “something that represents something to somebody.”<sup>8</sup> Lacan modifies it critically but making explicit the support he found in that. Thus, the signifier (Saussurian), unlike the sign, “represents a subject for another signifier”. This definition is paradoxical in relation to that of Peirce, since the term to be defined, which is the signifier, appears a second time in the statement that defines it, as it is seen, it is formally circular (Miller, 2000).

Lacan introduces the signifier through a circular definition because it is essentially and structurally presented in a binary form that is evidenced in the definition itself. Thus, the signifier cannot be thought of alone, isolated, but as a binary oriented insofar as it is a signifier that has its value as a subjective representation for another.

We can see how Lacan, who until now had not appropriated Peirce's sign as he will do towards his last teaching, and as it will be shown later, will take sides with the Saussurian signifier because he still maintained the hypothesis of the existence of communication.

The only mention Lacan makes, directly and within the framework of structuralism, of Peirce (besides having implicitly taken it in his formula of signifier) is when he points out in a footnote in *On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis* (1957-58) that what Jakobson takes from Jespersen, to designate those code words that only make sense by the coordinates (attribution, dating, place of issue) of the message called *shifter*, is what Peirce names as symbols-indexes in his classification. (Lacan, 1957-8, p. 517).

## ABANDONMENT OF LINGUISTICS AND STRUCTURALISM

However, one of the consequences of positioning in structuralism was that the statement “to be structured as a language” was at risk of becoming tautological. As Milner argues, a language only has the properties of a structure but, at the same time, there are no properties but in and by a structure, we therefore fall into a circularity, as we said. And this is the problem Lacan encounters.

Therefore, Lacan will begin to turn away from structuralism insofar as linguistics does not allow him to account for the complexity of the unconscious. Linguistics could not play any specific role in the theory of structure and if structure was to be the point where the theory of the unconscious and modern science were knotted, a theoretical invention became indispensable. Lacan says in *L'Étourdit* (1973): “Thus, the reference by which I situate the unconscious is precisely that which is beyond linguistics” (in Milner, 2003, p. 151)<sup>9</sup> making explicit, in this way, a farewell to linguistics.

The theoretical construction that allows apprehending the structure as a knotting point between psychoanalysis and modern science will be a general theory of the letter. This theory will have two moments. A theory of the *matheme*, as the typical letter of a transmissible knowledge, and a theory of writing as the theory of every possible letter. The letter from the early Lacanian period is derived from the theory of the signifier, the letter of the last period, an autonomous theoretical object. This passage from one theory to another can be clearly seen when in 1957 Lacan equates a phoneme to a letter, as the localized structure of the signifier, and he says: “By letter I designate that material support that speech itself borrows from language” (Lacan, 1957 [1988], p. 475). Whereas in 1973, he will say that both letter and writing are situated in the order of the real and, therefore, they share the lack of meaning. Thus, the letter is what one reads, insofar as opposed to the writing which is not destined to be read.

In this new device, the structure itself can be separated from all reference to the structuralist program, which is disappearing in Lacan. This is the statute of *Seminar XX Encore* (Lacan, 1972-73)

[1995]) in which the affirmation of any structure is maintained, even though structuralism is no longer present. At this point, Charles Sanders Peirce comes in.

## SECOND PERIOD: “THE SIGN IS MY ISSUE” LACAN AND PEIRCE

For a long time, Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) had been almost unknown and the limited existing publication of his work had been quite difficult to access. His writings, called by his compilers Collected Papers, were published only in 1931, almost 20 years after his death, and not in a complete way despite having been recognized as one of the most important forerunners of modern semiotic theory. Peirce was not only interested in semiotics, he was also the author of studies on the most diverse fields of knowledge: Mathematics, Logic, Physics, Chemistry and Philosophy (Zelis, Pulice, Manson, 2000).

Peirce belonged to what became known as the “Harvard Group” in the 1870s in the United States, a group of philosophers among whom were William James and Chancey Wright, interested in the consideration and status of science, an issue that ostensibly marked their developments.

One of his great interests was to distinguish the objective properties concerning the facts that we are forced to recognize logically as independent from our thinking. Pragmatism begins with Peirce<sup>10</sup>.

Despite his training in the hard sciences, he ends up sliding from scientific thought to “the science of semiotics”. In this way, while in his courses on general linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure conceived semiology as a science to be constituted, defining as its objective the study of the life of signs in the heart of social life, Peirce affirmed, almost simultaneously, to be advanced in the task of clearing the territory to open the way to what he called semiotics, i.e., the doctrine of the essential nature and the fundamental varieties of the possible semiosis (cited by Zelis, Pulice, Manson, 2000).

In this way, just as in linguistics a subject is the subject of the structure, in Peirce a subject is the subject of the semiotic network: the sign occupies the place of the absent object, and just as de Saussure concern was how to isolate the language in order to turn it into an object of scientific analysis, for Peirce the concern is how the subject knows. Finally, as we see, although both share the same positivist environment, while Saussure absorbs it, Peirce rejects it (Bitonte, 2002).

For Peirce, we have no power of thought without signs and from this place, the process of inquiry can be characterized as a process that operates according to the manipulation of signs. Thus, thought is continuous, insofar as in the continuity of thought, thought-signs are in permanent flux. One thought leads to another and this in turn to another and so on (Peirce, 1965).

In that sense, Peirce asserted that it was incorrect to base knowledge on intuition; however, he did not refute the existence of intuition. According to him, we may have intuitions but, even if we do, we can never be sure what they are about.

However, and on the other hand, for Peirce, a sign is not only associated with other signs in thought, it is also connected with things, characterized by Peirce as the objects of the signs or the *suppositum* by which the sign stands. In turn, a sign cannot stand, but only by one of its aspects. This particular respect is what Peirce calls the *ground* or foundation of the sign. Peirce conceives the *ground* as an object of the immediate consciousness that determines the constitution of the sign.

A sign or representamen is something which stands for someone for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses someone, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign or may be a more developed sign. This sign it creates, I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen (Peirce, 1965, p. 228).

The *ground* would be a general quality or attribute which is different from the predicate we use in perceptual judgment. The *ground* is the element that makes possible the agreement between perceptual judgment and that which perceptual judgment refers to. If the judgment refers to the object, the *ground* is needed to determine which aspect of the *object* the judgment refers to (Vallejos, 1999).

In this way, Peirce presents a progressive chain of logical *interpretants* that are moving away from the first *object* represented. Thus, each substitution originates a set of otherness that makes it be another and at some point that semiotic object. This occurs because the *representamen* is never in the place of its *object* in all its vastness, but with respect to some kind of substitutive possibility, the “foundation” or “ground”.

With Peirce we have a triadic scheme. In this scheme there is a step from observational experience to concept and, in that sense, the concept is an element that allows us to interpret the world. So, for Peirce, no sign refers to the “real thing”, but every sign necessarily refers to another sign.

The triadic relationship between the *object*, the *ground* and the *representamen* is what makes it possible to create another sign in the mind of the interpreter. This other sign is called by Peirce the *interpretant* of the initial sign. Now, we can characterize the inference as the transit from a sign constituted in the relation *object*, *ground* and *representamen* to its *interpretant*.

Now, the sign, when completed in the mind of the *interpretant*, always represents something different from itself. This plurality of interpretations makes Peirce propose an infinite semiosis, in which the sign triad supposes that each element of the sign is also a sign, which opens infinitely (Peirce, 1986).

From the above, it emerges Lacan's interest in the Peircean sign. The idea that “a sign, or *representamen*, is something that stands to somebody, for something, in some aspect or disposition” (Peirce, 1986, p. 22). But also the proposal of an infinite semiosis and the impossible, which will generate productivity in the later Lacan.

We know that at this stage of Lacan's work, he postulates the logic of the Not-all and the tables of sexuation. We also know of the passage from *matheme* to the *knots* in order to account for the complexity of the unconscious. We will see now how this passage occurs in line with the triadic sign and how Lacan appropriates it starting from emphasizing the real to arrive at its enunciation: “the signifier is the sign of the subject” (Lacan, 1972-73 [1995], p. 171), in this kind of return to Peirce.

Lacan introduces for first time the Borromean knot on 9th of February, 1972, in the context of his *Seminar XIX ...ou pire*. There, he postulates a knot of three circles where two of them are not knotted together and they are only supported by the third.

In the same Seminar, Lacan points out that a sign has nothing to do with a signifier. A sign is always the sign of a subject (Lacan, 1971-72 [2012]).

During his *Seminar XX* Lacan invites linguist François Recanati, who will relate the triadic logic with infinite insistence, while identifying aspects of Peirce's cosmological and mathematical thought in relation to the concepts of “interpretant” and “object”.

This interpretation of the Peircean text from Recanati is what most interests Lacan. That is, the relation between *representamen* and interpretant, which makes possible the recognition of the laws according to which a sign gives origin to another sign, producing that infinite semiosis,

which Lacan translates as existence is insistence.

These production grammars will lead Lacan to make a change, as we saw, in *Seminar XX* (1972-73 [1995]) regarding the first pairs of signifiers. From now on, he will present signifier One, S1, the written letter that is written without any meaning effect. In this way, there will appear an S1 isolated and separated from the signifying chain. For that reason, the “written” will not belong to the same register as the signifier.

In 1972, in his text *L'Etourdit*, he emphasizes the fact that the Real is impossible. This means that symbolization of the Real, understood as the reduction of the Real to the Symbolic, is taken to the limit. Thus, the impossible is a term only conceivable from the Symbolic, if there is to be Real it is necessary there be a demonstrative significant articulation founded on non-existence, presenting a sort of *impasse*. The Real cannot be defined outside the signifying articulation (Miller, 1999). Symbolization not only does not annul *jouissance*, but sustains it (Miller, 1998).

This issue is what calls into question the category of signifier and what leads Lacan to promote the category of the letter, and not only the letters of logic but also the letters (*lettres*) that are sent (Miller, 1999).

But, in addition, as we had seen, at first Lacan takes the definition of Peirce's sign: “A sign represents something for someone” and in opposition to this definition he introduces his definition of signifier as that which represents a subject for another signifier. In this way, he maintained the structure of representation. But, “someone”, Miller points out (1999), was not its recipient, it was not the bond between sign and what it represents. Here, “someone was no more than a subject transported in the chain, only a signifier or set of signifiers, making the signifying articulation relevant. We will now see that Lacan will change his mind and say: “a signifier is the sign of the subject”. But, why does he change his mind?

A key text for getting a response is *Television* (1973 [2002]), where he uses the term “sign” to refer to the “symptom”, arguing that it is not enough to state that symptom only has a signifying structure, but that there is also something of the body at stake. Therefore, the symptom cannot be completely reabsorbed into the signifier. He will not only affirm that “the unconscious is structured as a language”, but he will now modify his definition of the unconscious to say that there is a relationship between the effect of meaning and the production of *jouissance*. Lacan will say: “The sign is my issue”. Thus, we have that there will be discourse when there is a distinction between the effect of meaning and the production of *jouissance*, when there is a distinction between truth and real (Miller, 2000):

[The truth] every time it is affirmed as an ideal whose support can be the word, is not an easy thing to reach [...]. The whole truth is what cannot be said. It can only be said on condition that it is not taken to the extreme, that it is only said half-truth. (Lacan, 1972-1973, p. 110)

That real of which symptom is made, which is not easy to be achieved and which is now defined as sign, will lead Lacan to say in *Autocomentario* (1973):

I would like psychoanalysts to know that everything must lead them to the solid support they have in the sign and that they must not forget that the symptom is a knot of signs. Since the sign makes knots; [...] it is precisely because the knots - as I tried several times to look into in my seminar - are something absolutely capital. (Lacan, 1973, p.18)

This new position, added to his incorporation of the knots, is what leads Lacan to question the category of signifier and what takes him to promote the category of the letter. The letter borne is jouissance of the Other (Lacan, 1972-73 [1995]).

Lacan then stops arguing that what cures the symptom is meaning (1953 [1988]), and he says that psychoanalysis does not operate at the level of meaning (1973). At the core of the symptom there is always a misunderstanding, a “nonsense”, a meaningless signifier. He calls this meaningless signifier a sign. Miller proposes to consider that Peirce definition is appropriate for the Lacanian sign insofar as it is one, presented in the form of a unity that is susceptible of a separate absolute in relation to someone who deciphers it.

Now, unlike the theory of signifier, language not only has an effect of signification but also has an effect of jouissance that forces the subject to the eternal return of the same sign, the letter being the sign considered in its materiality as a distinct object of the signifying chain.

Therefore, Lacan will say in *Seminar XX* that the “signifier is foolish” (1972-73 [1995], p. 30) because meaning and all the significations are elsewhere, remaining there, without much to tell us. On the other hand, the letter has a hidden meaning.

The letter, Lacan also argues, is impossible to read. If there are no signifiers in play, it implies an *x*. In the place of signification, there is something, but we don't know what it is, so this real of the letter limits the interpretation.

The letter refers to jouissance, insofar as property of a living body, and jouissance redirects to the *S1*. Jouissance, first of all, is situated in one's own body and it is always one's own body that enjoys it. For this reason, Lacan plays, from the misunderstanding, with the title of his seminar that he names *Encore*, which sounds the same as *en corps*<sup>11</sup>. Thus, he will say: “The function I assign to the *letter* is that which makes the *letter* analogous to a seed” (Lacan, 1972-73[1995], p. 118), giving us the idea of the reproduction of the letter, insofar as living, and the existence of jouissance provided that life is presented in the form of a living body. Although this condition of jouissance is not enough, another condition is necessary, which is that of the signifier, that is, the signifier as cause of jouissance (Lacan, 1972-73 [1995]).

This means that the living becomes subject also through the signifier, it is made of lack-of-being, which is what divides it. For this reason, Lacan replaces the term subject with *parlêtre*, which is the opposite of lack-of-being. The *parlêtre* is the subject plus the body, it is the subject plus the enjoying substance (Miller, 1998).

Thus, one version of this jouissance will be phallic, and the other will be the word (blah-blah-blah) that is not addressed to anyone, it ignores the Other. And if by speaking it enjoys, communication ceases to be a priority.

There is jouissance of *lalangue*, as long as the subject has a body. For this reason, Lacan brings the body into psychoanalysis, in the same way that he brings in the jouissance of the word. The *parlêtre* enjoys when it speaks (Miller, 1998).

Being is the being of the speaker, no longer it is the subjective truth. The supposition in this period is a body, because a body is necessary to enjoy, by speaking it enjoys, the meaning is jouissance (jouis-sense) (Lacan, 1971-72 [2012]).

But, in addition, this moment is founded on no relation, and this also concerns the disjunction of signifier and signified, disjunction of jouissance and the Other, of man and woman. Thus, all those terms that formerly assured the conjunction: the Other, the Name of the Father, the phallus, and that appeared as primordial, are now reduced to connectors (Miller, 2000).

For Miller, the concept of no relation is opposed to that of structure, since the former takes as data a number of relations, defined as articulation, exemplified with the structural minimum *S1-S2*. That is to say, it is the formulation of the relation to which the quality of being real is attributed,

with the category of what is necessary, that is, what does not cease to be written (Lacan, 1972-73 [1995]). With the structure, not only the articulation S1-S2 was admitted as given, but also the Other as prescriber of the conditions of experience, the paternal metaphor, the nodal articulation of the structuring Oedipus and of the given relation as not ceasing to be written.

The no relation calls into question, mainly, the relevance of operating on jouissance from the word, from the meaning. Therefore, this new perspective starts from sustaining that there is no sexual relation, but there is jouissance, and there is jouissance insofar as property of a living body, a body that speaks. This implies, as we said, the disjunction of jouissance and the Other, especially understood as a signifying system. Thus, it brings forth the Other from the Other with the modality of the One, as true Other from the Other. Jouissance, as we also said, leads to a single S1, separated from the Other, to a meaningless assignable signifier. This jouissance One ignores the Other. In *Seminar XIX* (1971-72 [2012]) Lacan will say that he will give One the value of that in which his discourse consists and it consists, insofar as it is that value that hinders sexual intercourse, that is, phallic jouissance.

Thus, if the Saussurian pair had allowed Lacan the proposal of writing in the sense of the cipher S1-S2, with truth value and the possibility of writing the relationship between signifier and object<sup>12</sup>, in *Introduction to the German Edition of the Écrits* (Lacan, 1973 [2012]) he would replace it with another binary: sign and meaning. A sign, as Peirce said, is for someone and it is in this point that meaning can be taken.

Lacan then makes a theoretical construction without using the difference between signifier and signified, replacing it with the sign and meaning pair. At the same time, when reflecting on the escape of meaning, he will devalue the term signifier because it is the object of linguistics and not of psychoanalysis (Miller, 2003).

In this way, in this new proposal, the sign is something to be deciphered that also carries a meaning. For this reason, Lacan will say that the function of the cipher is fundamental there. It is what designates the sign as sign. And it is necessary that, through deciphering, the succession of signs, which at the beginning are not understood, reveal a meaning. The analyst thus defines himself from that experience that allows him to distinguish sign from meaning. The formations of the unconscious, as Lacan called them, demonstrate their structure by the fact of being decipherable. That which is sign will be ciphered and deciphered by the analysand and the meaning will be interpreted by someone, that is why it is “something for someone”. In this way, just as the jouissance in a cure must be questioned, “meaning is decided”. That is why a sign is something to be deciphered. Unlike the signifier, the sign is always marked by a presence, “there is no smoke without fire”, Lacan points out. The sign is a sign of a presence that someone is there, of an incarnated presence. When there is a sign, there is someone, unlike the signifier that is articulated to another signifier to represent a subject. But when there is a subject it does not mean that there is someone, insofar as a subject is an effect of signification. That is why, for Lacan, love is articulated to the sign, since love consists in giving what one does not have, it is the most difficult of the gifts (Solano Suarez, 2003).

In this sense, Miller (2003) argues that it is as if in the dimension of language, linguistics had taken the significant/signified pair to reason about the effects of signification, but the problem of following that path is what cannot be grasped since there is production of jouissance in language.

Substituting the signifier/signified pair by the sign/meaning pair is returning on this side of the difference of signifier-signified, which allows to think about the effects of signification but independently of its value of sexual jouissance. It is a way of “truncating” language, if we think of it from its lost object, that is, meaning. Therefore, we find that Lacan restores as first use of the sign, sexual jouissance and not as it had been for the signifier, that its first use was the effect of meaning (Miller, 2003).

In turn, Lacan –in his Seminar XXIII– will continue to delve into the *Borromean knot*, from which he will propose the three registers (real, symbolic and imaginary) as equivalent. It is from the

knots that Lacan re-establishes the triadic scheme. The knot is made of three circles, equivalent and treated in the same plane. In this way, this new turn is produced within the framework of his last theoretical production.

Miller considers that this last movement in Lacan is what leads him to define the signifier as a sign, a formula that belies his former definition of signifier, that Lacan will present as canonical. Thus, as we have said, from now on Lacan will no longer oppose the meaning to the signifier, but to the sign.

It is in the *Seminar XXIII The sinthome* (1975-6 [2006]) that he will replace Saussure's binary signifier S1, S2, with Peirce's triadic sign, implied in a triadic logic that Lacan had been proposing since 1953, when he first posited the three registers.

Peirce reappears. Not only Lacan will no longer say "the signifier represents jouissance for another signifier," as he argued in *Seminar XVII The Reverse of Psychoanalysis*, but he will now return to it in another way, in the sense that in Lacan we will find the formula: "The signifier is the sign of the subject" (1976-77). That is to say, Lacan will now define the signifier as a sign and it can be a sign because there is an unconscious that cohabits with *lalangue*. The sign is that which in the parlêtre carries of its unconscious.

Then, meaning, which could not be trapped with the Saussurean signifier, to stop it and make it true, is recognized as jouissance-meaning impossible to stop because it flows. Now, with this return to Peirce, meaning is regulated, decided. The subject has its implication in the Other, it becomes sign, with its three faces from a triadic logic, since the subject as such is an imaginary supposition.

The analytical interpretation will be based on misunderstanding and nonsense. With this type of interpretation, the body is moved by way of perplexity and not so much by way of elaboration. It is a semantic vibration.

To conclude, the reformulation of the concept of the unconscious and, therefore, the proposal of a psychoanalysis different to that of Freud's, based on the passage from a binary to a triadic logic, has consequences in the clinic. In the first case, a clinic handled with a logic of the signifier making its phenomena depend from the dominant function of only one signifier, the Name of the Father. This implied that the symptoms referred to this form alone, regardless of their autonomy concerning the function of the Other. In this logic, where the action of the structure that omits the position of the subject, as a response to the real and as a choice over jouissance, is highlighted, the clinic is structured around the Other and the inheritance of the Father as carrier of the phallus. On the other hand, the triadic logic and the passage to the relation of the subject with the *nonsense* signifier, with the sign, better account for the phenomena of jouissance. This makes it possible to think of the One that gives rise to a variety of jouissance and symptoms.

It is from this journey and location of the epistemic passage in Lacan around the concept of sign, and the productivity it generates throughout his teaching, that I have tried to capture something of this impossible category. A writing effort regarding its appropriation and usefulness in the Lacanian invention, with the hope of having been able, at least, to skirt along one of the most difficult notions to define.

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