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with best regards
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Lili Peller

FREUD'S CONTRIBUTION TO LANGUAGE THEORY

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FREUD'S CONTRIBUTION TO LANGUAGE THEORY

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From the eighteenth century until recently the dominant view of language as presented in textbooks of psychology was that its origin and main function lay in its being an instrument of social control, man's main vehicle of communication. Human language was seen as a further development, a "higher" branch of animal communication but not categorically different from it. Karl Bühler (1934) stressed the fact that a study of the child's acquisition of language will yield the most valuable clues to mankind's acquisition of it.

Recently other views, some old, some new, have come to the fore. Language is seen as a requisite for conceptualized thought (Cassirer, 1944); the structure and vocabulary of specific language types are considered of primary importance in shaping the thinking of an ethnic group (Whorf, 1956); language is regarded as a vocal actualization of man's tendency to see realities symbolically (Sapir, 1933). Communication is one of the basic functions of language.

It is, of course, generally known that the term "symbol" has a specific meaning in psychoanalysis. It refers to the affect-loaded, partly unconscious, *primordial* symbols that are central to our understanding of mental disorders and of creative thought, dreams, parapraxes, jokes, etc. Freud, Ferenczi, Jones, O. Rank, Sachs, Silberer, and others all used it in this way. However, in general usage and in language theory "symbol" has a very broad meaning: a symbol is primarily a conceptual tool. It represents, brings to the mind, something that is a "mere idea" and as such has no other physical properties, or something that transcends the sensory data given here and now.

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A superficial study of Freud may leave the impression that he ignored the existence of symbols in that broad sense, i.e., of *cognitive* symbols. Nothing could be further from the truth. Freud's "verbal sign" ("word remnant") obviously has a symbolic function; it is a symbol in the general sense. Many everyday symbols carry an affective charge in addition to their cognitive significance. Many primordial symbols are universally ("naturally") understood. They transcend the understanding of language.

Freud's early study of the functions of consciousness led him to views about language which, to the best of my knowledge, anticipated those of later thinkers. His references are brief, indeed fragmentary, yet they hit upon essentials. They are unknown for a number of reasons, one of them being that they are cast in different terms.

Therefore, I shall briefly comment on Freudian terms and on some key linguistic concepts before I come to my main topic. Many of Freud's propositions departed radically from those generally accepted, yet he hardly ever entered into polemics.¹ Instead he simply avoided terms which implied assumptions he regarded as no longer tenable. For instance, the term "libidinal object" was introduced by him in order to undo the contemporary belief that sexual strivings of necessity attach themselves to a person of appropriate age and opposite sex. A "libidinal object" may very well be such a person, but it can also be somebody of the same sex; it can be oneself, a body part, a thing or—an idea. Furthermore, while a "beloved person" is generally treated in about the same way throughout the relationship, the libidinal object is—during the successive phases of individual development or during life's vicissitudes—experienced and treated in radically different ways.

For the new science of psychoanalysis, Freud sought to avoid such terms as *Geist*, *Seele* (mind, soul) and instead introduced the neutral "mental apparatus."² He shunned expressions like "reasoning" (judging, meditating, cogitating) and spoke simply of "mental acts." The deliberate simplicity of this terminology is obvious. We

¹ Dr. L. Jekels once told me that Freud also advised his disciples not to waste time and energy in polemics.

² Here I am at variance with Arlow and Brenner (1964). According to them, "mental apparatus" refers to a particular group of processes, to a part of the contents of the mind, mind being the more inclusive term.

have a muscular apparatus carrying out muscular acts, and we have a mental apparatus carrying out mental acts.³ And of mental acts there are *two* basic types. Again striving for the least pretentious terms, Freud introduced *numerals* to denote them. He spoke of mental acts (functions, processes) which are either on the *primary* or on the *secondary* level. These terms are not content oriented. Not being definitive, they do not hamper further modifications of the concepts. (The irony is that today the terms primary and secondary are far from being simple.) Primary processes are called so for two reasons: they come earlier and they are more primitive (1900). They are governed by affects, while secondary processes also take cognizance of reality.

In linguistics we speak of *signs*, *signals*, and *symbols*. I shall use "sign" as the umbrella concept, comprising both signals and symbols. In our daily life we seldom wait for the full impact of an event but respond to its signals. To give simple examples: dark clouds signal rain; when a car slows down on the highway, red lights shine up in its tail fins. Here we have one *natural* and one *artificial* (conventional) signal. Both inform us about impending events and tell us how to act, to behave, now or in the very near future. Higher animals, too, respond to a wide variety of signals. A grazing deer sniffs the air or stands motionless to detect the faintest rustle of leaves "signaling" a hunter. Obviously animals may surpass us in the detection of particular signals and in the speed of their motor response. Although animals also respond to artificial signals, the other kind of signs, namely, symbols, are not part of their world, of their *Umwelt* (self-world) in Jakob von Uexküll's sense (1934). A symbol represents something that transcends the physical data given to us *hic et nunc*. It may represent—and thus make manageable (or permit us to make public)—something that has no other sensory qualities. Here I have referred primarily to a symbol in the general sense, to a conceptual symbol.

A symbol in the psychoanalytic sense refers to an image carrying an affect that in the deepest strata belongs to something else. According to Ferenczi (1912): "Only such things (or ideas) are symbols

³ "*Psychischer Apparat*" in German. However, "psychic" carries other connotations in English. The customary "mental" neglects affects. The abbreviation "psy" may be the most appropriate usage. However, in this study I shall use the customary term.

in the sense of psycho-analysis as are invested in consciousness with a logically inexplicable and unfounded affect . . . which . . . they owe . . . to *unconscious* identification with another thing (or idea), to which the surplus of affect really belongs" (p. 277).

Psychoanalytic (or *primordial* symbols, as I propose to call them) and conceptual symbols may be far apart, but they are not categorically different. I have introduced (1962) yet another term, *protosymbol*, to refer to the young child's not differentiating clearly between symbol and symbolized. Many times his interest goes to things which he seemingly confuses with body parts, functions, products, or persons. A transitional object, for instance, is something that stands midway between a protosymbol and a psychoanalytic symbol. The intense affect that the infant directs toward it belongs in its fullness to his mother and to his own body self. Hence, it is typical for the child to lose the transitional object when his relationship to his mother is profoundly shaken.

Freud's comments about language can be found in his earliest and latest writings (1891, 1895, 1900, 1911, 1913, 1915, 1923, 1933, 1939, 1940). In a way, all references to primary and secondary processes deal implicitly with the functions of language. Freud's brief scattered comments on the relationships between thought processes, consciousness, and verbal signs (language) should be culled from his work so that they can be related to one another and to the more recent studies in the field. Hartmann's comment (1956) about the long latency of many Freudian ideas comes to mind. The different terminology partly explains the delay, but another reason is probably more important: Freud's later work assigns to consciousness a position of secondary importance, while his comments on language seem to stress the fact that consciousness plays—via language—a decisive role in shaping mental acts.⁴ Yet this supposed contradiction is hardly an actual one. By clarifying the specific functions that consciousness performs, we obviously also deepen our insight into the consequences of its absence. Here are several of Freud's main references to language in their chronological order.

⁴ Edelheit (1964) states: "I should like to speak of the ego as a vocal-auditory organization—both a generator of vocal utterances (speech) and, reciprocally, a differentiated structure whose features are critically determined by vocal utterances and its derivatives."

In two remarkable passages, Freud outlined, in 1900, the functioning of the mental apparatus in its relation to language:

. . . [this apparatus] is capable in waking life of receiving excitations from two directions. In the first place, it can receive excitations from the periphery of the whole apparatus, the perceptual system; and in addition to this, it can receive excitations of pleasure [*Lust*] and unpleasure [*Unlust*], which prove to be almost the only psychical quality attaching to transpositions of energy in the inside of the apparatus. All other processes in the ψ -systems, including the *Pcs.*, are lacking in any psychical quality and so cannot be objects of consciousness, except in so far as they bring pleasure or unpleasure to perception. We are thus driven to conclude that *these releases of pleasure and unpleasure automatically regulate the course of cathectic processes*. But, in order to make more delicately adjusted performances possible, it later became necessary to make the course of ideas less dependent upon the presence or absence of unpleasure. For this purpose the *Pcs.* system needed to have qualities of its own which could attract consciousness; and it seems highly probable that it obtained them by linking the preconscious processes with the mnemonic system of linguistic symbols, a system which was not without quality. By means of the qualities of that system, consciousness, which had hitherto been a sense organ for perceptions alone, also became a sense organ for a portion of our thought-processes. Now, therefore, there are, as it were, *two* sensory surfaces, one directed towards perception and the other towards the preconscious thought-processes [p. 574].

The new surface (the new organ of perception) has a highly specific function: it registers those thought processes that are coupled with verbal signs.

The second passage deals with the same facts, but the emphasis and the metaphors are altered. Freud speaks of the creation of a new series of qualities or attributes leading to "a new process of regulation which constitutes the superiority of men over animals" (p. 617). He states the reasons why this new series of qualities arose. On the one hand, mental functions as such have no sensory properties (i.e., they cannot be heard, seen, or touched); on the other hand, affects accompanying thought must be kept within narrow limits lest they disturb its course. How, then, can mental processes reach

consciousness? He answers: by becoming linked with word memories, with verbal signs.⁵

I have some comments on these passages. To state in 1900 that human beings had something that animals did not possess, not even to a lesser degree, must have taken considerable courage. This was, after all, the century in which the concept of discontinuity between man and beast had been most forcibly and spectacularly challenged.

The problem of the *origin* of language has long been an arena for speculation. Freud might have felt that the tools for tackling this problem of human evolution were not yet at hand, or that its solution was not mandatory at this juncture, and thus he went straight to the *function* which language serves, bridging the gap in our knowledge with a bluntly teleological phrase: "it later became necessary" (p. 574).

He returned to problems of thinking and language in 1911. The explanatory concept of fluid and bound cathexis was amplified and thinking was defined as a kind of trial action, requiring expenditure of less energy than would actions of our striated muscles. He also expanded his earlier idea: those mental processes that deal not with mere pictorial representations (memory images) of sensory data, ikons in today's terminology, but with *relations* between them were originally unconscious. Only by becoming linked with verbal signs did they obtain qualities which then could reach consciousness.

Once again I recommend comparing my version with a verbatim translation of the same paragraph. To describe the process of thinking as a kind of trial action is in line with Freud's endeavor to use the least pretentious terms and similes. Moreover, this simile is very fruitful. Not only does a trial action require less energy; it is characteristic that everything that occurs in a trial action can be reversed, undone.⁶ That an action executed merely in "thought" is not final can of course also be a tremendous danger. For creatures living in the midst of constant emergencies, it would be more often than not a severe, potentially fatal drawback. Those who are not surrounded

⁵ My summary of these and subsequent statements is considerably simplified and the original text should be consulted.

⁶ A similar thought has been expressed by Craik (1952): "If the organism carries a 'small-scale model' of external reality and of its own possible actions in its head, it is able to try out various alternatives, conclude with the best of them, react to future situations before they arise" (p. 61).

by predators, however, become free to explore a wider range of possibilities. They can—without anxiety—try many more combinations: whatever has been “done” in thought can be undone. In this and in some other respects I consider play to be the prestage or matrix of thought. In play, too, almost every move can be reversed.

In “The Unconscious” (1915), Freud discussed the functions of language more extensively than in any of his earlier or later studies. He examines the peculiarities of schizophrenic language and thought and amplifies what he said earlier about primary and secondary processes. Nonanalytic psychology distinguishes between the simple and rather concrete thought processes of animals and the “higher” mental acts of man, and some writers have seen in Freud’s distinction between primary and secondary processes a parallel to these two forms of thought. This view I cannot share. Both processes as characterized in psychoanalysis are quite distant from the mental processes of animals; both rely on symbols, although on different kinds of symbols: the role of primordial symbols for primary processes is similar to the role of conceptual symbols for secondary processes.

In the same study Freud introduces another topic: the conscious representation of an object can be regarded as consisting of the representation of a thing (*Sachvorstellung*) to which has been added the representation of the word. It is the joining of these two—thing and word—that creates the representation of the object. In short: thing representation plus word representation equals object presentation. This may seem to be a novel and difficult idea, but only because we often use “thing” and “object” as synonyms, which they are not. Actually, it is a restatement of Freud’s earlier views: a mental function which carries no affect can reach our awareness only by becoming linked with a verbal sign. This addition of a verbal sign constitutes a hypercathexis: “It is these hypercathexes, we may suppose, that bring about a higher psychical organization and make it possible for the primary process to be succeeded by the secondary process . . .” (p. 202).

In 1900, Freud had differentiated between the act of mentally *representing* something (*vorstellen*) and the act of *relating* such representations. Now he indicates the importance of relations:⁷ they

⁷ “Relations” refer to any and all connections, functions between representations of things; relations establish facts, abstractions, groupings, generalizations.

and not the images of sensory data constitute the decisive part of our thought processes.⁸

He returned to this topic in 1923. In addition to verbal signs, indeed, prior to them, there exist visual memory traces which can be linked by thought processes. Some people seem to have a preference for them. Yet, by and large, such images can bring to consciousness only the sensory *materials* of thought, not the relations between them. Visual or other sensory expressions for relations do not exist. Thus thinking in images produces at best a very incomplete awareness. It remains closer to unconscious processes than does thinking in verbal signs. No doubt, it is both ontogenetically and phylogenetically older.⁹

Freud then deals with the question: how can something be remembered? How can it once again become conscious? This is his reply: "it dawns upon us like a new discovery that only something which has once been a Cs. perception can become conscious, and that anything arising from within (apart from feelings) that seeks to become conscious must try to transform itself into external perceptions: this becomes possible by means of memory-traces" (p. 20).

No doubt, experiences of the preverbal phase exert a far-reaching influence upon our character, and actual experience in analysis shows that the earliest preverbal memories tend to reappear in dreams, symptoms, moods, and affects, but seldom and only with great difficulty can they be cast into verbal form. They remain forever shadow-like, unconvincing. Of course, events that occurred in the child's preverbal phase may have been later recounted to him by a parent or a relative and the child may confuse the memory of the anecdote he was told with the actual experience. We also need to remember that the verbal phase starts with the understanding of language, not with its use. Between the two there may be quite a time gap.

⁸ "But most of our interests center upon events, rather than upon things in static spatial relations. Causal connections, activities, time, and change are what we want most of all to conceive and communicate. And to this end pictures are poorly suited. We resort, therefore, to the more powerful, supple, and adaptable symbolism of language. . . . The trick of naming relations instead of illustrating them gives language a tremendous scope; one word can thus take care of a situation that would require a whole sheet of drawings to depict it." This quotation is from S. Langer (1942, pp. 71-72), on whose clear distinctions I have drawn to a large extent.

⁹ Of course, some formal relations can be crudely indicated by images (this happens in dreams), and motor activities can be pantomimed.

Freud's statement (1923) may refer to the complete and distinct clarity with which verbal signs endow our experience. In the foregoing studies he had based the need for verbal signs upon two different factors. Verbal signs are introduced in order (a) to *replace* affects, or (b) to bestow sensory attributes upon thought *relations*, thereby enabling them to reach consciousness. And later, he added that relations—not imagery of *any* kind—are the characteristic of thinking.

However, Freud not only elaborated his earlier views and added to them, he also revised one point. In 1915, Freud had declared verbal signs to be indispensable for thinking on the secondary level, but in his last work (1940) he modified his earlier view: "It would not be correct, however, to think that connection with the mnemonic residues of speech is a necessary precondition of the preconscious state. On the contrary, that state is independent of a connection with them, though the presence of that connection makes it safe to infer the preconscious nature of a process" (p. 162).

This revision cuts deep.¹⁰ Verbal signs remain a reliable indication that a process takes place on the secondary level, but they are no longer regarded as indispensable. The formation of an idea and putting this idea into inner language are not *one* but *two* distinct processes. We may assume that secondary processes have a widely varying admixture of verbal signs, which may be faint or distinct, auditory, visual, or kinesthetic. In Freud's formulation: "The preconscious state, characterized on the one hand by having access to consciousness and on the other hand by its connection with the speech-residues, is nevertheless something peculiar, the nature of which is *not exhausted by these two characteristics*" (p. 162; my italics). But if the presence of verbal signs is not mandatory, we are left with the question: what *is* the essential feature of thought processes on the secondary level? Freud stated the question but left it unanswered. In his writings Freud discussed primary processes extensively, but he referred only occasionally to processes on the secondary level. Would it nevertheless be possible to pinpoint *the*

¹⁰ Without it we might find ourselves thrown back to a position resembling the theories of J. S. Mill who postulated an identity between correct thought and correct language. Students of psychoanalysis and language conceptualize the relations between language and thought in different ways. Balkányi (1964) distinguishes verbalization—putting something into inner language—from the process of speech.

essential features of secondary processes by first enumerating the characteristics of primary processes and then stating their direct opposite? While such a procedure may not necessarily yield correct results, it is worth attempting.

In the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933), Freud tells us quite forcefully that primary mental acts lack the framework of time and space which philosophers regard as the essential prerequisite for all thought. That the dimension of time has no validity for the processes in the unconscious had been stated by him repeatedly before. In 1900 and again in 1915 he had pointed out that primary acts are basically isolated from one another. They enjoy a high degree of mutual independence. It is this isolation that results, among other things, in the fact—so bizarre to our conscious thinking—that incompatible opposites may stand side by side without disturbing each other. In still other contexts, we are told that for primary processes external reality is nonexistent; they know only inner reality. In a footnote added to "The Unconscious" Strachey states: "Mentions of the 'timelessness' of the unconscious will be found scattered throughout Freud's writings" (p. 187).

By the direct and complete reversal of these findings, we arrive at the following characteristic of *secondary* mental processes: they take place in a *framework of time and space*—and, we may add—of *causality*. They follow the laws of grammar, syntax, and logic. Secondary mental processes relate to external reality. Secondary mental acts are *coherent*. And here we realize that we are back on very familiar ground: the ego's synthetic or organizing function reigns for secondary processes (Nunberg, 1930).

By this indirect procedure, we may, after all, have struck upon the distinctive feature of secondary mental acts: they occur within a stable multiple framework *the conception of which is predicated upon language*. It is for this reason that they can be so easily cast into verbal signs. And verbal signs, i.e., words, enable us to make mental acts public, to project them into the future or to retrace them step by step, to compare them with physical reality and with the thoughts of others, to distinguish the possible from the actual.¹¹

¹¹ "The psychic concatenation, or the establishing of the unity of context, is due to the synthetic function of the ego; we are thus faced with a general principle that may well deserve to be re-emphasized" (Kris, 1950, p. 308).

When Freud first mentions verbal signs he refers primarily to the fact that they endow mental processes with attributes, i.e., sensory attributes which render them "perceivable." This is similar to the way in which a thyroid metastasis becomes perceptible to the Geiger counter: i.e., by becoming linked with a *substance* that registers with the electronic device. Or, in order to study certain features of the blood circulation, we inject methylene blue into the arteries of a rabbit. In either case the added substance does not change the process we are observing; it merely temporarily links this process with something that can register with our senses. But verbal signs have a different function: they change the basic character of mental acts. Or more correctly: the addition of verbal signs is indicative of a basic change. Freud's later formulation (1915) makes this quite clear: "becoming conscious is no mere act of perception, but is probably also a *hypercathexis*, a further advance in the psychical organization" (p. 194).¹²

A person's mental acts can take place on the secondary level only insofar as he recognizes and accepts the framework of *time*, *space*, and *causality*. The laws of ordered (disciplined) thinking are predicated upon this framework. These laws in turn can be conceived and integrated only by someone who has developed the "second surface of perception." In sum: for conceptual thought verbal signs must be *available* to the mental apparatus. By no means do they have to accompany each step of a mental act. Words are not tags added to precreated images; they may serve as labels, but that is not their principal function.

Freud commented on the role of language only in relation to our thought processes; he did not deal with communication. However, in today's discussion this essential function of language cannot be left out. Animals living in groups communicate with one another effectively, with the help of signals, employing various sense modalities—hearing, sight, smell, and touch. Some even have coded signals—that is, signals with a standardized meaning (see, e.g., the studies

¹² "Freud found that in the transition from the unconscious to the preconscious state, a cathexis of verbal presentations is added to the thing-cathexis . . . [and later] the fixing of verbal symbols is in the development of the child linked with concept formation and represents one main road toward objectivation" (Hartmann, 1951, pp. 149-150).

on communication among bees and ants by von Frisch [1927] and Schneirla [1946]).

Human beings also communicate with one another by means outside the realm of symbolic language. Just what comes under the heading "communication"? Spitz (1957) tells us: "We will call communication any perceivable change of behavior, be it intentional or not, directed or not, with the help of which one or several persons can influence the perception, the feelings, the emotions, the thoughts or the actions of one or several persons, be that influence intended or not" (p. 3).

In the worthy attempt to avoid a narrow definition (i.e., "communication equals language"), Spitz seems to have gone too far. I consider it communication when the mood, affect, or thought of one person reaches another person, influencing his thought or affect. A communication may be conscious or not, addressed (directed) or not, current (face to face) or recorded (mediated over spatial or temporal distance).¹³

The foremost means of direct communication are speech, facial and body expression, gesture, pantomime. Vocalization of any kind and tactual contacts can also serve communication. Recorded (i.e., mediated) communication can use various sensory modalities. Usually there is a *sender* and a *receiver*. However, a broad definition should also include those marginal instances in which there is only a sender or only a receiver; e.g., the recording of a thought without making it public (making it potentially public) or the erroneous assumption that the behavior of another person expresses an affect or thought. There is only a sender in the former case, while there is only a receiver in the latter. In addition, there is self-communication, the case in which sender and receiver are one and the same person.

Spitz's definition does not cover all these instances, but it includes other interactions which I do not consider communication. Another person's action, his "perceivable change of behavior" may influence my behavior in a mechanical way, i.e., without conveying any affect or thought of his. For instance, in a crowd somebody

¹³ "Communication is a complex phenomenon that appears in different forms wherever there is social structure whether in human or animal society. In human beings communication is supplemented by language and speech and becomes the more subtle and delicate an instrument" (Beres, 1957, p. 421).

pushes me and I am perfectly aware that he did not do it deliberately and is unaware of it. In this case his behavior does influence my actions, and it may indeed cause strong feelings—yet he did not communicate with me. Spitz's definition minimizes the human element. The defunct author of a book, or of an orally transmitted song or riddle, or of a sculpture or a painting, still communicates with us. Indeed, human existence is unthinkable without this kind of communication.¹⁴

A disturbed mother may take care of her baby in a competent way—she goes through the processes of feeding, cleaning, dressing—without any attempt to communicate with the infant. There is plenty of “perceivable changes of behavior” on her part; yet there is no communication. Spitz himself has contributed excellent studies of this phenomenon and its dire consequences. Direct communication relies mostly “on changes of behavior”; yet these are not indispensable, while the knowledge that “the other” has feeling and thought is. The patient who remains silent for a few minutes communicates something else to us than when he prolongs the silence for a longer time, and the same is, of course, true for the person who stares at us for a short time or a long period. The *absence* of a change of behavior can indeed be communicative.

Loewenstein (1956) says about unconscious communication: “Certainly we do not underestimate the importance of the immediate understanding of the unconscious between two people, of the intuitive grasping of non-verbal forms of emotional expressions” (p. 466).

One more point: there is little doubt that for most of us communication with others is needed not only for social give and take, but to preserve the integrity of secondary-process thinking. Recent studies on sensory deprivation have shown that hallucination takes over when there is no sensory input (Heron et al., 1953; Lilly, 1961). It is safe to assume that even with sensory input but without com-

¹⁴ As a definition of “social interaction” the statement by Spitz may be more acceptable. The *Columbia Encyclopedia* (1950) gives this definition of communication: “the transfer of thoughts and messages, as contrasted with transportation, the transfer of goods and persons. The basic forms of communication are by signs (sight) and by sounds (hearing). The reduction of communication to writing was a fundamental step in the evolution of society for, besides being useful in situations where speech is not possible, it permits the preservation of communication, or records, from the past.”

munication with anyone, secondary processes are likely to deteriorate. Restriction of self-communication (no pen and paper) will accelerate the decay. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* starts a diary before he takes care of other urgent needs.

Today the conceptual organization of experience is considered to be the primary function of language. Freud's views on language were in sharp contrast to those dominant in his own time; that may explain why they were ignored. Today they are unknown partly on account of the terms he used. This is a loss because his hypotheses about primordial symbols and instinctual drives, about consciousness and language are relevant to modern linguistics. The ability to use conceptual symbols is preceded by and can scarcely be seen as independent of the propensity to understand symbols and to form them in the psychoanalytic sense (primordial symbols). The acquisition of language activates the child's latent ability to bestow conceptual order on his experience. This development changes the child's whole existence; it is by no means restricted to his intellectual growth. Anna Freud (1936) has expressed this forcefully and lucidly: "We recall that in psychoanalytic metapsychology, the association of affects and drive processes with verbal signs is stated to be the first and most important step in the direction of the mastery of instinctual drives. . . . The attempt to take hold of the drive processes by linking them with verbal signs which can be dealt with in consciousness is one of the most general, earliest and most necessary accomplishments of the human ego. We regard it as an indispensable component of the ego, not as one among its activities" (p. 178; my translation).

In other words, the ego does not gradually learn to use symbolic language; symbolic language is one of its constituents. In a recent study A. Katan (1961) indicated that emotionally disturbed children whose ability to express their feelings was severely limited could be helped by fostering this ability.

An animal has instincts and can be taught to restrain them by a system of reward and punishments. These may be either gross or subtle; in any case, they are external agents. A human being is not only differently endowed; he also goes through phases that are radically different from the phases of animal development. Rewards and punishments play their part, but they are not the *essential agents of the child's changes*. It is the acquisition of symbolic language that

makes possible the metamorphosis of the manifestations of drives and the burgeoning of human mental life. Language brings a tremendous enrichment to all inner life, to the affects we experience as well as to our thought processes. The acquisition of language is in turn predicated upon earlier emotional developments. All cognitive growth is based upon earlier steps in the sphere of affects. The following points may have been expressed before; however, for me, they represent new facets, arrived at by combining recent findings about language with those indicated by Freud. Academic psychology stresses how much language widens our knowledge of the external world. Now we add that language deepens greatly our awareness and knowledge of our inner world and that the two developments are interdependent. The tool of language enables us to take a position of distance from our own physical and mental acts. Of course, the clarity of self-awareness differs greatly for different people and for the same person at different times. Language gives us both a distance from and a new intimacy with our own selves. Because language permits us to make mental processes public it also enables us to keep them private. And the defense mechanism of repression is predicated upon language.

Language enables us to "step out of our skin," to see ourselves as it were from the outside. Thus it is language that makes it possible for us to put ourselves into somebody else's place. The infant comes to differentiate between self and nonself in a gradual way. With the acquisition of language this distinction becomes far more clear-cut. This view in turn implies that there are strata of the personality for which this distinction is not valid.

Once the child has entered the language world, his store of information about the world around him grows by leaps and bounds—not because the acuity of his sensory organs or his memory span increases so much but because language makes possible the conceptual organization of what he sees and hears.

Freud stressed that initially we tend to *deny the existence* of something we do not like. Later we become able to conceive of its existence, even though it gives us displeasure. There are other somewhat similar developments. The young child acts as if things that he cannot perceive at the moment, upon which he cannot act with his sensory or motor apparatus, have *ceased to exist* (Piaget, 1957).

By developing an attitude of trust in his mother and by practical experience the child gradually learns that something that is absent or hidden *can* return. He begins to live in a world where there is *object constancy* (Hartmann, 1952). This decisive step in the child's object relations and in his cognitive growth is predicated upon antecedent emotional development. But it is language that makes this step far more reliable and distinct: if something is not here now, we may nevertheless be in a position to know—through the coordinate system of verbal signs—how far away in space and time it is. We may even establish if, how, and when it will be here again. In Freud's terminology: the mental representation of a sensory datum—the thing representation—now has the hypercathexis of the word representation.¹⁵

The developments which issue in early object constancy do not depend upon language. On the other hand—and this is my proposition—the oedipal situation is unattainable without language. The genital arousal, the awakening of possessiveness, of jealousy and hostility, are, of course, not language bound; but the oedipal fantasies and ambitions, the broad spectrum of oedipal wishes are.

Gradually we come to realize how decisively language influences the expression of drives and is influenced by them. One more comment: language appears as the most distinctive human achievement. Yet this does not imply that the gulf between the preverbal human infant and the offspring of the other primates is smaller than the gulf between the human adult and the adults of the other primates (Peller, 1962).

According to Kris (1950), formulations in terms which permit differentiations in degrees, in shading, are preferable to formulations in terms of extremes. Yet in presenting the functioning of the mental apparatus the concept of two types of mental activities seems indispensable. It is a theoretical rather than a practical distinction because both types take part in most mental activities. Even in dreams and in the manifestations of neurosis secondary processes are not absent. Moreover, the decision which type an act belongs to is at times very difficult.

¹⁵ "Indeed, the use of language permits human beings to give actuality even to events that are remote in time and space, and yet to distinguish them from those which exist here and now" (Loewenstein, 1956, p. 466).

Freud's insight into the functions of language came in these steps: first he realized that language, "verbal signs," endowed mental acts with qualities that made it possible to perceive them, to make them public and manipulate them. Later he postulated that language had a far greater scope—it made possible, indeed, it brought into being "a higher psychic organization" which from then on could partly replace the earlier organization. Finally, he postulated that this did not imply the linkage of every mental act with a verbal sign.

Recent theoretical formulations (Hartmann, 1953; Arlow and Brenner, 1964; Beres, 1957) stress that the structural point of view adds far more to the understanding of dynamics than the descriptive fact of consciousness or its absence. It seems that by a completely different route, emphasizing very different aspects of mental processes, I have come to a similar finding: verbal signs are the decisive acquisition of mankind not because they aggrandize the potential territory of consciousness but because they make possible a radically different organization of our mental apparatus.

I am well aware of the incompleteness and the shortcomings of my presentation. Today's formulations have a good chance of appearing crude and trivial tomorrow. Perhaps we are still bypassing essentials, but that should not be a reason to hold back what we can state. Language does two things of very unequal consequence: it labels sensory data and by this adding of another physical property—i.e., the name—makes them more definite and stable. And language is our main tool in the construction of a symbolically organized universe. Words are both—signals as well as symbolizers. In the former capacity they are additions to something pre-existent. In the latter capacity they take part in the creation of what they symbolize.¹⁶

And one more speculative thought. Freud (1900) asserts that unconscious wishes are always active (p. 577). In another context (p. 567) he says that nothing but a wish can set our mental apparatus

¹⁶ Hartmann (1953), discussing the disturbances of language in schizophrenia, also refers to the general functions of language. Language provides signals for communication (a function which is not restricted to humans), while symbolic language is "designatory." He continues: "I am speaking of words meaning something, pointing to something, stating something—that function by which . . . language, besides adding verbal to thing representation, is also that function by which the former is made to signify the latter (p. 189).

at work. And in still another place (p. 537) he states that all psychical activity starting either from outer or inner stimuli ends in innervations. I suggest this reformulation: *our mental apparatus is active all the time*. Most of this activity is unconscious. An arising wish gives it direction, effectiveness, and may bring it to consciousness. Only a part of our mental activity becomes conscious and *only a part* of either kind (conscious or unconscious) leads into acts that are open to sensory inspection: to talking, doing, or intentional perceiving. Another part remains without visible, palpable results. This brings me to my last point.

The function of language which interested Freud was the added consciousness (awareness) it could bestow on mental acts. From here we can go on a short excursion into theoretical biology. It is customary to differentiate between lower and higher phyla by the early absence and the later growing ability to learn by experience. Instinctive acts of, say, insects were formerly viewed as absolutely rigid; today students of animal behavior concede that there is a limited plasticity. A spider follows a sequence of acts in catching its prey; a moth has a certain chain of acts in finding and preparing a place where it will deposit its eggs, disguise the spot, etc. If the experimenter interrupts this sequence and then permits the animal to return to it, the insect will not continue from where it left off—it will start again from the beginning. This can be repeated until the animal gives up altogether. In contrast, the members of the higher phyla are said to “learn,” i.e., to observe environmental conditions and to adapt their behavior to them. Feedback modifies their behavior. They learn from previous experience.

I would like to express the same facts with a slightly changed emphasis. The awareness of lower animals of the effects which their own actions have upon the environment is very limited. This may account for the narrow limits within which they can change their actions. In contrast, the higher animals are able to see, hear, feel or smell *what their actions* do to the environment and to modify them accordingly. The ability of higher animals to learn, to profit by experience, is a function of their ability to observe the impact of their own acts upon their environment.

Man's specific asset is his ability to “observe” the impact of his motor acts *and* of his mental acts as well. We can say that the source

of his superior power to modify his environment derives from his ability to evaluate, to gauge, to change his doings *before* they have any visible effects. We arrive at this paradox: man is capable of carrying out complex acts which are—for the time being or forever—*completely inconsequential for his physical environment*. This ability is the matrix of his power to modify his physical environment profoundly, to construct and destroy on a far greater scale than any other animal.

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