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Some Remarks on Jean-Pierre Cléro's *Lacan and the English Language*

Of the many virtues of Jean-Pierre Cléro's *Lacan and the English Language*, three seem to me particularly worthy of note. The first concerns the originality of the project. Extant scholarship on Lacan includes distinguished studies of Lacan and the German philosophy: Lacan and Hegel, Lacan and Kojève's Hegel, Lacan and Heidegger, as well as Lacan and Kant. Jean-Pierre Cléro has set out to explore a new terrain: Lacan and authors of the English language. A second merit follows from the first. The book has succeeded in reconstructing Lacan's constant – sometimes meticulous, sometimes questionable or even misguided – interest in various authors: not only Lewis Carroll, Poe and Joyce, but also Bentham, Berkeley, and C.S. Peirce. Finally, in the details of its analyses, *Lacan and the English Language* succeeds in bringing into view new aspects of the authors who mattered to Lacan. The most remarkable example is perhaps that contained in the book's first case study, which bears on Bentham's doctrine of fictions.

Much could be gained by returning to the encounters treated in the book. Today, however, I will pose two questions in the hope that they may serve as points of departure for further discussion. The first question concerns the earlier Lacan; the second concerns the later Lacan. One Lacan, in short, before *Écrits*, the other after it.

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To introduce the first question, I would recall the book's four-part articulation. The reader first encounters "English philosophers" (one might also say "philosophers in English," neither Berkeley nor Peirce having been English), second, elements of logic and linguistics drawn from English language authors, third, English language literary writers, and fourth, English language psychoanalysts. My first question concerns a point at which Lacan's teaching and writing crucially involved the reading of English language logic and philosophy, literature and psychoanalysis, without, however, attracting Jean-Pierre Cléro's interest in his many chapters. I am referring to cybernetics, a field of research that played a role in the development of Lacan's early project, most clearly in Seminar II.

In June 1955, Lacan gave an abbreviated account of a portion of his research in a lecture to the *Société française de psychanalyse* under the title "On the Nature of Language, or Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics." Lacan left no doubt as to the role that this new science played in his thinking. He cited the United States mathematician and philosopher Norbert Wiener; he alluded to the United States mathematician and electrical engineer, Claude Shannon, and to the United States mathematician Warren Weaver, whose ground-breaking "mathematical theory of communication" had appeared in 1948 (and which Weaver himself sent to his friend Jakobson, and in which Lévi-Strauss seems to have been interested). Lacan may also have drawn on the work of other English language thinkers, such as John Zachary Young, the British zoologist and microphysicist, who had participated in the development of information theory and who was close to the New York psychoanalyst Lawrence Kubie, whom Lacan may also have read.

The opening of *Lacan and the English Language* presents a fascinating account of the ways in which, for his doctrine of the symbolic function, Lacan drew, through Ogden, on Bentham's theory of fictions. In 1955, however, Lacan suggested that it was the science of

information that has led him to isolate the field of the symbolic: “The one thing which cybernetics clearly highlights,” he stated, “is the radical difference between the symbolic and the imaginary orders.” Later in the same lecture, Lacan went further, attributing the following discovery to cybernetics: “Man is engaged with all his being in the procession of numbers, in a primitive symbolism which is distinct from imaginary representations.” This leads me, therefore, to pose a question about Lacan and the English language field of science and thought that was cybernetics (or “information theory” or “communication theory”), a question about the ways in which this domain mattered to Lacan and to his thinking and, further, about where Lacan’s engagement with cybernetics stands with respect to the subjects examined in this book.

The second question I would like to raise is less strictly historiographical and concerns a difficult yet major point in Lacan’s later theory. To introduce it, I would recall a grammatical observation that Jean-Pierre Cléro has made in his Afterword (p. 296). French words are often “doubled up” in English: where French has the single word *valeur*, the English lexicon possesses both “worth” and “value”; likewise, *liberté* corresponds to “freedom” as well as “liberty,” and *force* may be rendered by both “force” and “strength.” Sometimes, however, the situation is the reverse. One example involves a noun that is crucial in this book: *language*. French has the nouns *langage* and *langue*, but (setting aside the word “tongue,” which is rare in scholarly discourse), English has only one corresponding term: “language.” In the passage from French to English, one difference thus vanishes; more exactly, it becomes indiscernible.

Obviously, this fact is of consequence for a project that seeks to explore “Lacan and the English Language,” for one must wonder: What type of “language” is at issue? Or *which* one? But the term “language” is also a matter of importance for the attempt to understand Lacan in his own terms and in their shifting. At many points in his book, Jean-Pierre Cléro evokes Lacan’s

dictum: “*L’insconscient est structuré comme un langage*, “The unconscious is structured as a language.” Despite the presence of the indefinite article *un* (“a”) in the syntagma “a language,” this is a thesis on language with a capital L. More exactly, it is a thesis on structure. In the 1966 paper to which Jean-Pierre Cléro has referred today, “Of Structure as the Inmixing of an Otherness,” Lacan goes so far as to state that “being structured” and “being a language” are synonymous terms. Yet *Lacan and the English Language* is also attentive to the ways in which, with the passing of the years, Lacan became increasingly reliant on language not as *langage* but as *langue* (as a particular idiom, such as French, English or Chinese).

The great example, of course, is *lalangue* – “language” in a single word. Nothing about this concept can be taken to be self-evident, but my own understanding of Lacan’s teaching leads me to the following position: when Lacan proposes his classical theory of the unconscious as structured “as a language” (*comme un langage*), he does not yet reason in terms of *lalangue*; conversely, when he turns to *lalangue*, he reconceives of *langage*. I suspect that the perspective of *Lacan and the English Language* is different and perhaps even opposed to mine.

“One of Lacan’s most repeated theses,” Jean-Pierre Cléro writes, “from the beginning to the end of his work, is ‘The unconscious is structure like a language’” (290). That Lacan repeats the thesis is certain. Yet does the claim remain the same in repetition or does its meaning change? I would propose that its meaning changes. This shift, in turn, necessitates nothing less than a redefinition of *langage*. For the Lacan of “La Troisième,” the primary term is *lalangue*. By 1974, *lalangue*, in other words, comes first; *la langue* (in two words) and *le langage* come second. It appears that from Jean-Pierre Cléro’s perspective, however, the situation is the reverse. For Lacan, the primary term always remains *langage*; the evocation of *lalangue* is secondary and does not cause Lacan’s later theory to differ fundamentally from his earlier one.

Jean-Pierre Cléro may therefore make the following remarks about what he calls “wordplay”:
 “That wordplay should strike our fancy, very well; that it plays the role of evidence is much more debatable. Lacan only fooled around with it, but he sometimes fooled others who fell into the trap. For if theoretical work has any meaning, it is [...] to lessen ambiguities, not to introduce new ones. Why does wordplay, which would be absurd in mathematics, in physics, and the human sciences, have more of a place in psychoanalysis?” (297-8)

It seems to me that, starting a certain point in his thinking, Lacan draws on what Jean-Pierre Cléro has called “wordplay” precisely as a kind of evidence. The decision to do is motivated by a startling thesis (cited on p. 140 in a note), in which Lacan contests the apparently chance relations between like-sounding words in given languages. It is not “by chance,” Lacan alleges, that *voeu* is indistinguishable from *veut*, that *non* is indistinguishable from *nom*, and that *deux* and *d’eux* can hardly be told apart. I would note in passing that there would be much to say about the properly modal status of this being “not by chance.” But today I would simply observe that Lacan presents like-sounding words as evidence – evidence of *lalangue*.

I note in passing that corresponding evidence might also be found in English. Examples include “eye” and “I”; *hide* (“to dissimulate”) and *hide* (“animal skin treated for human use”); *to lie* (“to deceive”) and *to lie* (“to be prostrated”); “no” and “know.” There are doubtless indefinitely many more.

Words audible through other words, signifying sequences perceptible through each other: such phenomena, which may be a matter of “play” but may also be serious, involve homophony. In a recent, illuminating essay, Jean-Claude Milner offers the following account of Lacan’s late position: homophony is the material of *lalangue* (in one word), yet such homophony does not belong to *la langue* (in two words). The science of language (whether it is a science of *la langue*,

as it was for Saussure, or a science of *langage*, as it has been since Chomsky) hardly encounters homophony. In this respect, most linguistics adheres to the ideal of “theoretical work” that Jean-Pierre Cléro evokes. Lacan’s psychoanalysis, by contrast, like literature (or *littérature*), and like Jakobsonian linguistics, must take *lalangue* (in one word) into account. For this reason, Lacan’s psychoanalysis distances itself from the work of regular linguists, which is *linguistique*, turning rather to *linguisterie*, a roguish reasoning on and with language.

Jean-Pierre Cléro has asked: “Why does wordplay, which would be absurd in mathematics, in physics, and the human sciences, have more of a place in psychoanalysis?” In its context, the question seems rhetorical and may be meant to dismiss wordplay from any serious investigation. At the risk of taking the question all too flat-footedly, *au pied de la lettre*, I would nonetheless wager an answer. Even if it would be absurd in mathematics, physics and the human sciences, even if it is out of place in dominant linguistics, homophony must play a role in psychoanalysis from the moment that Lacan, as a reader of Joyce, doubts that there is such a thing as language in general (*langage*), even as he doubts that there are languages in particular (such as the English language or the French language). Homophony must occupy a crucial place in psychoanalysis from the moment that, at the level of the real, Lacan posits a radical indiscernibility of the unconscious and speaking, an indiscernibility that he names *lalangue*.