



Beyond the Psychoanalytic Dyad

DEVELOPMENTAL
SEMIOTICS
IN FREUD,
PEIRCE AND
LACAN

JOHN P. MULLER

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*Developmental Semiotics
in Freud, Peirce, and Lacan*

John P. Muller

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*To: William J. Richardson, S.J., Ph.D.,
teacher, colleague, friend*

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Introduction

In *The Songlines*, a remarkable view of native Australian culture, the late Bruce Chatwin wrote:

Aboriginal Creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path—birds, animals, plants, rocks, water-holes—and so singing the world into existence. (1988, p. 2)

In the traditional “Walkabout” ritual, one retraced this ancestral path, singing the names of these beings in order to keep them and oneself in existence. The formative power of signs, their causal impact on mind, brain, body, and subjectivity, is the overarching theme of this book, which examines the broad field of semiotics. My interest in semiotics and its application in the practice of psychoanalysis is shaped by my reading of Lacan and my psychoanalytic work, much of it with hospitalized patients. I have also participated in textual studies in which a psychoanalytic perspective informs the reading of literature. It is this weighing of words which, in turn, moves us toward a more differentiated reading of Freud.

My interest in culture is both personal and conceptual. My mother tongue is Hungarian. I learned to speak English as I approached my fifth birthday, and I have gone out of my way to make it possible to speak and hear Hungarian in my own analysis. I also worked and lived for three years on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation assisting in the development of a Psychology department at a new

community college. The experience that endures beyond such intercultural contact is not simply that cultures are different, but that one's own culture is now different, experienced as different from itself.

In his recent book, the eminent psychologist Jerome Bruner urges us to consider why culture must be a central concept for psychology. "Begin with the concept of culture itself—particularly its constitutive role," he tells us (1990, p. 11). The constitutive role of culture, what Northrop Frye has called "a semi-transparent envelope" through which we view nature (1981, p. 129), has been neglected by the individualistic orientation of American psychology as well as by ego psychology and the more recent dyadic focus of psychoanalysis. We are coming to realize, however, that a third is required to frame the dyad, to provide an orienting structure, and this third may be understood as the semiotic framework and context of culture.

For Bruner, human evolution crossed a divide "when culture became the major factor in giving form to the minds of those living under its sway" (1990, p. 12). Bruner emphatically agrees with Clifford Geertz, who writes, "there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture" (1973, p. 49). In arguing for a cultural psychology, Bruner takes issue with a major nineteenth-century legacy, the prioritization of biology in our attempts to understand human behavior:

The causes of human behavior were assumed to lie in that biological substrate. What I want to argue instead is that culture and the quest for meaning within culture are the proper causes of human action. The biological substrate, the so-called universals of human nature, is not a cause of action but, at most, a constraint upon it or a condition for it. (1990, pp. 20–21)

Bruner reverses the traditional relation of biology and culture with respect to human nature:

it is culture, not biology, that shapes human life and the human mind, that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system. It does this by imposing the patterns inherent in the culture's symbolic systems—its language and discourse modes, the forms of logical and narrative explication, and the patterns of mutually dependent communal life. (1990, p. 34)

As others have emphasized (Sacks, 1989; Levin, 1991; Harré and Gillett, 1994), the human brain is especially plastic in response to the discursive environment whose structures of narrativity govern what is preserved in memory. Narrativity, in turn, "relies upon the power of tropes—upon metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, implicature, and the rest" (Bruner, 1990, p. 59). We shall

also see that this process of narrativity, whereby the human infant becomes an active participant in what Bruner calls a “protolinguistic system,” is inaugurated soon after birth (1990, p. 69).

In the following chapters I will argue that the framework of culture anchors the development as well as the psychoanalytic investigation of the individual, for subjectivity emerges first of all as intersubjectivity. The transmission of culture operates through the semiotic codes governing the rhythm of touching, gazing, and vocalizing of both mother and infant. The individual emerges in dialogue with another sign-using subject, through a process of mutual recognition and generalization. As Bruner writes, “Is not Self a transactional relationship between a speaker and an Other, indeed, a Generalized Other?” (1990, p. 101). This Other is indispensable for understanding the Self.

The psychoanalytic features of such a self and its transactions, the complexities of human development and of psychological structure, are discerned in a new way in the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981). Lacan’s chief contribution, in my view, consists in opening up experience into three registers or dimensions which he called the Real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. I take these three registers as constituting, in a broad way, Lacan’s semiotic code for interpreting experience, his code that specifies what is a signifier, what is a representation, what is unsignable, and what rules govern the dynamics of each. This way of discerning experience has been quite useful for thinking about cultural phenomena as well as the complexities of another realm, the treatment of psychotic patients and the understanding of treatment impasses. From a Lacanian perspective, for example, the structural difficulty giving rise to psychotic states consists in the absence of marked boundaries between the human subject and the dimension of the Real. Because of early developmental failures to create a stable edge for the self, the risk of dissolution and merger with the Other remains high. There is no firm line drawn on this side of which is the predictable, consensually validated realm of shared experience, and on the other side of which lies the field of the uncanny, the traumatic, the unnameable. This perspective, of course, is not unique to Lacan, for we can find it from Sullivan (1953) to Ogden (1989).

What I find distinctive in Lacan is how he attempts to call our attention to the fragile but necessary boundaries that circumscribe reality. These boundaries are effects of language that create stable relations by naming objects as well as subjects. This signifying function of language enables us to have perspective on experience and provides a zone of mediation so that we are not wholly captivated by the immediate. But this taming and liberating function of language is limited. Beyond its limits lies the undifferentiated Real. Lacan calls it the Real to distinguish it from reality, which is a differentiated social construction, a collage built of images and language. Oliver Sacks (1990) is forthright about this:

"The world does not have a predetermined structure: our structuring of the world is our own—our brains create structures in the light of our experiences" (1990, p. 48), and they do so continuously.

Although Lacan pointed to the Real as "what resists symbolization absolutely" (1953–54, p. 66), we can come close to it in Buddhist texts, in the writings of Christian mystics, and in literature. Usually we go through our day without attending to the limits of our consensually validated reality, but now and then we encounter the Real in the form of danger, catastrophe, death. Psychotic loss of boundaries, the breakdown of stable categories of thought, the effects of trauma, all bring the experience of the Real to the forefront. We see how sexual abuse victims struggle to reclaim their bodies and their histories by gradually fitting images and then names to their traumatic unintegrated experience. Kohut describes a specific type of dream, the "self-state" dream, as an attempt to cover "frightening nameless processes with nameable visual imagery" (1977, p. 109).

Visual images are the stuff of the register of the imaginary, the narcissistic field of self-presentation. The essential feature of Lacan's imaginary register lies in the one-to-one correspondence between features of an object and its image, unlike the arbitrary and pluralistic relations between signs, meanings, and objects. Despite the acquisition of speech, the Lacanian ego, formed by its image in a mirroring object, remains caught in the allure of external representations of itself. The ego is narcissistically sustained in its cohesion by reflections of itself such as photographs, automobiles, monuments, and, in the interpersonal field, admiration, imitation, and especially the glow that comes from being found desirable as glimpsed in the eyes of an other. Joyce Carol Oates, in her short story "Old Budapest," presents the imaginary register with precision:

Or was it, Marianne sometimes wondered, the first significant *gaze* that passed between her and a man, heavy with erotic meaning, almost intolerably exciting in all that it promised, or hinted at, or threatened?—This gaze, this exchange of looks, that constituted the pinnacle of romance: for she had experienced looks from men that penetrated her to the very marrow of her being, and left her dazed, and baffled, and weak, and, in a sense, obliterated. And stricken by the realization that no physical gesture, following such promise, could be equal to it. (1983, p. 24)

We can approach the interrelationships among the registers of the Real, the imaginary, and the symbolic by examining the status of the deaf as described by Oliver Sacks in *Seeing Voices* (1989). According to Sacks, only recently (Stokoe, 1960) has American Sign Language (ASL, or Sign) been recognized as a language, as satisfying "every linguistic criterion of a genuine language, in its

lexicon and syntax, its capacity to generate an infinite number of propositions” (1989, p. 77). The symbolic capacity of this language and of most deaf people had been underestimated or ignored, for signing was seen as merely “a species of picture writing in the air” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 14th Edition, 1960), for, as Sacks put it, it was the common notion “that ‘the sign language’ of the deaf is no more than a sort of pantomime, or pictorial language” (1989, p. 76). The signs of the deaf were thereby reduced to iconic units, functioning mainly in the imaginary register, governed in form by a one-to-one correspondence between the sign and its referent. The deaf were therefore judged incapable of more than a type of concrete cognitive activity, unless they went on to learn how to sign English or to lip read. This stereotype of the deaf is itself the type of thinking fostered by the imaginary register, as we shall see when we examine the Lacanian ego in later chapters.

Contrary to the stereotype, Stokoe, according to Sacks, was the first to analyze the structural features of signs, for he “was convinced that signs were not pictures, but complex abstract symbols with a complex inner structure” (1989, p. 77). What is distinctive, moreover, about Sign is its complex use of space:

We see then, in Sign, at every level—lexical, grammatical, syntactic—a linguistic use of space: a use that is amazingly complex, for much of what occurs linearly, sequentially, temporally in speech, becomes simultaneous, concurrent, multileveled in Sign. The ‘surface’ of Sign may appear simple to the eye, like that of gesture or mime, but one soon finds that this is an illusion, and what looks so simple is extraordinarily complex and consists of innumerable spatial patterns nested, three-dimensionally, in each other. (1989, p. 87)

Sacks therefore concludes that the use of “picturing, pictorial power, goes with the use of Sign—even though Sign is not in the least a ‘picture-language’ itself” (1989, p. 107).

Sacks provides additional data for the symbolic status of Sign, data that supports Lacan’s distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary registers. Sacks writes:

Though unconscious, learning language is a prodigious task—but despite the differences in modality, the acquisition of ASL by deaf children bears remarkable similarities to the acquisition of spoken language by a hearing child. Specifically, the acquisition of grammar seems identical, and this occurs relatively suddenly, as a reorganization, a discontinuity in thought and development, as the child moves from gesture to language, from prelinguistic pointing or gesture to a fully-grammaticized linguistic system: this

occurs at the same age (roughly twenty-one to twenty-four months) and in the same way, whether the child is speaking or signing. (1989, p. 90)

As a language, Sign “is processed by the left hemisphere of the brain, which is biologically specialized for just this function” (Sacks 1989, p. 95), as in the case of speech. But since Sign is so spatial, this means the brain must distinguish between two kinds of space, space encompassed by the symbolic register and space functioning in point-to-point correspondence: “The fact that Sign is based here in the left hemisphere, despite its spatial organization, suggests that there is a representation of ‘linguistic’ space in the brain completely different from that of ordinary, ‘topographic’ space” (Sacks, 1989, p. 95).

Additional evidence for this distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary registers comes from the specific dysfunctions found in deaf people with aphasia. In such “Sign aphasia” the dysfunction can appear in various ways, in the patient’s lexicon or grammar or in the capacity to make propositional statements:

But aphasic signers are not impaired in other, nonlinguistic visual-spatial abilities. Gesture, for example—the non-grammatical expressive movements we all make (shrugging the shoulders, waving goodbye, brandishing a fist, etc.)—is preserved in aphasia, even though Sign is lost, emphasizing the absolute distinction between the two. (Sacks, 1989, p. 94)

In these cases the use of symbolic space is impaired, but not the use of routine gestures in their one-to-one correspondences. In other cases the reverse is true:

Signers with right hemisphere strokes, in contrast, may have severe spatial disorganization, an inability to appreciate perspective, and sometimes neglect of the left side of space—but are not aphasic and retain perfect signing ability despite their severe visual-spatial deficits. (Sacks, 1989, p. 94)

In these patients the routine, fixed use of space is impaired, but the richly ambiguous use of symbolic space is not. In addition, signers use the face in a distinct manner, linguistically, in addition to the routine, affective use of the face, and once again the neurological findings corroborate the distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary registers:

The few cases studied of the effects of brain lesions in deaf signers upon facial recognition show a similar dissociation between the perception of affective and linguistic facial expressions. Thus, with left hemisphere lesions in signing subjects, the linguistic “propositions” of the face may become unintelligible (as part and parcel of an overall Sign aphasia), but its expressiveness, in the ordinary sense, is fully preserved. With right hemisphere lesions, conversely, there may be an inability to recognize faces or their

ordinary expressions (a so-called prosopognosia), even though they are still perceived as “propositionizing,” fluently, in Sign. (Sacks, 1989, p. 100)

Signing, therefore, is an elaborate symbolic activity utilizing visual thought patterns not simply as images but as symbols, not based on iconic resemblance any more than words are. This fundamental, systematic difference between iconic resemblance and symbolic convention, sometimes referred to as analog versus digital coding (Wilden, 1972), in which the former is hierarchically integrated into the latter, appears to have determined how the brain organizes spatial relationships.

This revolution in our understanding of Sign as a language has dislodged our stereotype and allowed us to see deaf people as having their own culture. Having a culture means that deaf people have a symbolically-mediated world, a socially constructed field of intersubjectivity. Without such linguistic engagement, through speech or Sign, the dominant register of experience would be the Real. Deaf signers do not live in the Real but in socially constructed reality, as Sacks again tells us: “It is certain that we are not ‘given’ reality, but have to construct it for ourselves, in our own way, and that in doing so we are conditioned by the cultures and worlds we live in” (1989, p. 73).

The construction of reality requires the use of names, the symbolic delineation of the surrounding environment. The passage from the imaginary register to the opening up of reality through the symbol is presented by Sacks as he describes pioneering work with a deaf pupil who had no language until almost age 14:

Then, to introduce Massieu to language, Sicard wrote the names of the objects on their pictures. At first, his pupil “was utterly mystified. He had no idea how lines that did not appear to picture anything could function as an image for objects and represent them with such accuracy and speed.” Then, very suddenly, Massieu got it, got the idea of an abstract and symbolic representation: “at that moment [he] learned the whole advantage and difficulty of writing . . . [and] from that moment on, the drawing was banished, we replaced it with writing.” (1989, p. 47)

With this change, when Massieu “perceived that an object, or an image, might be represented by a name, he developed a tremendous, violent hunger for names” (1989, p. 47). Names create “a region of order in the chaos” of the Real (1989, p. 55), the undifferentiated register in which one without language appears to be fixed “like an animal, or an infant, to be stuck in the present, to be confined to literal and immediate perception, though made aware of this by a consciousness that no infant could have” (1989, p. 44). Sacks describes such a consciousness as he could perceive it in an eleven-year-old with no language at all:

It was not only language that was missing: there was not, it was evident, a clear sense of the past, of “a day ago” as distinct from “a year ago.” There was a strange lack of historical sense, the feeling of a life that lacked autobiographical and historical dimension, the feeling of a life that only existed in the moment, in the present . . . [with] an intelligence largely confined to the visual . . . He seemed completely literal—unable to juggle images or hypotheses or possibilities, unable to enter an imaginative or figurative realm. (1989, p. 40)

In a word, he had not been acculturated, culture did not hold him, he existed in the register of the Real.

Being deprived of language means not only being incapable of symbolically differentiating experience; it also means that the development of the brain is altered: “Early language acquisition, whether speech or Sign, seems to kindle the linguistic powers of the left hemisphere; and deprivation of language, partial or absolute, seems to retard development and growth in the left hemisphere” (Sacks, 1989, p. 105). Sacks warns of the neurological hazards of congenital deafness, for if language experience is severely deficient, or otherwise aberrant, it may delay the maturation of the brain: “Neither language nor the higher forms of cerebral development occur ‘spontaneously’; they depend on exposure to language, communication, and proper language use” (1989, p. 110). Becoming a human subject is an effect of language, and this is what I take to be Lacan’s essential legacy for psychoanalysis.

In both teaching and writing I begin from the position that the Lacanian perspective may be unfamiliar to readers; for this reason the notions of imaginary, symbolic, and Real will unfold gradually and be presented as distinctive approaches to data from a variety of sources such as cognitive, social, and developmental psychology, literature, history, art, and psychoanalytic treatment. Because the notion of the Real is especially difficult to approach, it is commonly omitted from discussion. As Brett stated: “Like many others who discuss Lacan’s work I will bracket the Real and talk only about the Imaginary and Symbolic” (1981, p. 193). But to omit the Real, or to designate it with a “capital X,” as some do (e.g., Weber, 1982, p. 140), skews the meaning of the other registers. I have found it helpful to approach the Real through literature, not as a means of interpreting the work but rather in an attempt to explore how the work interprets us, how it sets up effects in us by providing contact with the Real. In this exploration I will try to use the triadic structure of the sign as elaborated by Charles Sanders Peirce, as well as his three categories of logical relations, which appear to have much in common with Lacan’s three registers. I hope by the end of the book the reader will come to know and to evaluate how these registers, as a semiotic code of experience, can contribute to psychoanalytic understanding.

Readers who want an introduction to the ideas of Lacan may find useful the books by Felman (1987), Clark (1988), Boothby (1991), and Muller and Richardson (1982, 1988). The book in hand is an attempt at integration rather than exposition; I don't mean thereby to justify lack of clarity, but to alert the reader. I do not take part in the current debate pitting hermeneutics against natural science, since there seems to me no quarreling with the position that it is helpful to bring findings into an argument and that findings are only found and interpreted through a point of view, as so cogently argued by Phillips (1991) in his definitive survey of the philosophical issues.

The book's first four chapters present my reading of selected data from child development research, psychology, and linguistics, and approximate a semiotic model of "normal" development. The following three chapters examine in a Lacanian framework the structural basis of psychotic states as indicative of massive semiotic failure in development. The final three chapters on human narcissism suggest why "normal" development may be impossible. I conclude with an attempt to integrate hierarchical models in semiotics and psychoanalysis.

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Part One

Developmental Semiotics

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Mother–Infant Mutual Gazing

The contemporary emphasis in psychoanalytic theory on the dyad is often presented as an advance over individualistic, intrapsychic, defense/drive models of human functioning. The relation to “objects” is conceptualized as a separate developmental line, progressing cognitively from partial to whole perceptions or affectively from split to integrated relationships (Kernberg, 1980). Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) elaborated a developmental line of narcissistic integration in which the notion of a “selfobject” is offered to account for how one person may be used by another to carry out one’s own psychological functions, the most important of which is the maintenance of a sense of cohesiveness.

A chief function of the selfobject is to “mirror” the infantile, grandiose self, whose developmentally appropriate exhibitionistic behavior is ideally met in childhood by an approving, admiring, mirroring adult. If this process does not occur, the ensuing narcissistic pathology signifies a developmental arrest. The appropriate treatment, according to self-psychologists (e.g., Wolf, 1976; Ornstein, 1990; Fosshage, 1990), is for the therapist to “mirror” the patient by sustaining an intersubjective congruence, meeting demands for admiration, maintaining affective attunement. They invoke recent research on mother–infant face-to-face interaction (e.g., Beebe and Lachmann, 1988) as evidence for the positive impact of empathic resonance.

I will try to re-formulate the results of these infant studies in terms of developmental semiotics, with semiotics as defined by Charles Morris:

Semiotic has for its goal a general theory of signs in all their forms and manifestations, whether in animals or men, whether normal or pathological, whether linguistic or nonlinguistic, whether personal or social. Semiotic is thus an interdisciplinary enterprise. (1964, p. 1)

By examining infant studies in the light of semiotics (Deely, 1990; Colapietro, 1993), we may be in a position to elaborate a distinctive developmental line (A. Freud, 1963). This developmental line, I will suggest, spans a movement from coerced mirroring to recognition, or, in semiotic terms, from enacted iconicity to index to symbol. From this perspective, mirroring appears to be an early constraint on the infant's behavior whereby the mother's emotional presentation induces a mirroring response in the infant. This dynamic is what I take Lacan to mean by the imaginary register, whose dynamics govern dyadic relations. Recognition, in contrast, does not coerce sameness but posits difference, and appears in the mother's utilization of a semiotic code which the infant begins to use in mutual interaction with the mother. Understood in this way, the code, situated in the symbolic register, functions as a third to the dyad from the earliest period of development, with decisive consequences for our understanding of the analytic relationship and the relationship between psychoanalysis and culture.

Before I attempt to establish the semiotic status of such a code in the following chapters, I would like to emphasize Bruner's reference to a protolinguistic framework. Bruner conceptualizes the child's entry into meaning as a process of cultural transmission in which specific communicative functions are developed before the child has mastered formal linguistic expression, and these functions include "indicating, labelling, requesting, and misleading" (1990, p. 71). Such a "protolinguistic system" (1990, p. 69) provides knowledge of context, cuing, and ostensive reference and is organized by a narrative format with four major constituents: goal-directed action, a segmented order, a sensitivity to what is normative and what is deviant in human interaction, and a narratorial perspective (1990, p. 77).

I think we can find evidence for most, if not all, of the features of Bruner's protolinguistic system in some observations of early infant-mother interaction made a generation ago. Brazelton, Koslowski, and Main (1974) analyzed the behavior of five mother-infant pairs by coding films of short periods of intense interaction involving attention and withdrawal. The infants were from two to twenty weeks old and were judged to be normal. By three weeks of age two distinct systems of infant behavior had emerged, one for objects and one for mother. The difference was striking: "We felt that we could look at any segment of the infant's body and detect whether he was watching an object or interacting with his mother—so different was his attention, vocalizing, smiling, and motor behavior with the inanimate stimulus as opposed to the mother" (1974, p. 53).