

Jacques Lacan and the Other

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History

The "**other**" is perhaps the most complex term in Lacan's work. Freud uses the term "**other**" to speak of *der Andere* ("the other person") and *das Andere* ("otherness"). When Lacan first begins to use the term, in the 1930s, it is not very salient, and refers simply to "other people." Lacan seems to have borrowed the term from Hegel, to whose work Lacan was introduced in a series of lectures given by Alexandre Kojève in 1933-9.

Little and Big

In 1955, Lacan draws a distinction between the "little other" and the "big Other" ("the **Other**"), a distinction which remains central throughout the rest of his work.^[1] Thereafter, in Lacanian algebra, the big Other is designated **A** (upper case, for French *Autre*) and the little other is designated **a** (lower case italicized, for French *autre*). Lacan asserts that an awareness of this distinction is fundamental to analytic practice: the analyst must be "thoroughly imbued" with the difference between **A** and **a**,^[2] so that he can situate himself in the place of **Other**, and not of the **other**.^[3]

Little

The little other is the **other** who is not, in fact, **other**, but a reflection or projection of the ego.^[4] It is simultaneously the counterpart and the specular image. The little other is inscribed in the imaginary order as both the counterpart and the specular image.

Big

The big Other designates radical alterity, an otherness which transcends the illusory **otherness** of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification. Lacan equates the big Other with language and the law, and hence the big Other is inscribed in the symbolic order. Indeed, the big Other *is* the symbolic insofar as it is particularized for each subject. Thus, the **Other** is both another subject in its radical alterity and unassimilable uniqueness and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that subject.

Speech

However, the meaning of "the **Other** as another subject" is strictly secondary to the meaning of "the **Other** as symbolic order." "The Other must first of all be considered a locus, the locus in which speech is constituted."^[5] It is thus only possible to speak of the **Other** as a subject in a secondary sense, in the sense that a subject may occupy this position and thereby "embody" the **Other** for another subject.^[6]

Discourse of the Other

In arguing that speech originates not in the ego or even in the subject but in the **Other**, Lacan is stressing that speech and language are beyond conscious control; they come from an **other** place, outside consciousness, and hence "the unconscious is the discourse of the **Other**."^[7] In conceiving of the **Other** as a place, Lacan alludes to Freud's concept of psychical locality, in which the unconscious is described as "the **other** scene."

Lack in the Other

It is the mother who first occupies the position of the big Other for the child, because it is she who receives the child's primitive cries and retroactively sanctions them as a particular message. The castration complex is formed when the child discovers that this **Other** is not complete, that there is a lack in the **Other**. In other words, there is always a signifier missing from the treasury of signifiers constituted by the **Other**. The mythical complete **Other** (written **A** in Lacanian algebra) does not exist. In 1957 Lacan illustrates this incomplete **Other** graphically by striking a bar through the symbol **A**. Hence another name for the castrated, incomplete **Other** is the *barred Other*.

The Other Sex

The Other is also "the Other sex."^[8] The **Other** sex is always woman, for both male and female subjects.

"Man here acts as the relay whereby the woman becomes this Other for herself as she is this **Other** for him."^[9]