

opposing itself to sense, is also, by definition, opposed to relation, to communication' (Copjec, 1994: 21).

shifter The term 'shifter' was introduced into linguistics by Otto Jespersen in 1923 to refer to those elements in language whose general meaning cannot be defined without reference to the message. For example the pronouns 'I' and 'you', as well as words like 'here' and 'now', and the tenses, can only be understood by reference to the context in which they are uttered. Roman Jakobson developed the concept in an article published in 1957. Before this article, 'the peculiarity of the personal pronoun and other shifters was often believed to consist in the lack of a single, constant, general meaning' (Jakobson, 1957: 132). In terms of Peirce's typology of SIGNS, shifters were treated as pure indices (see INDEX). However, following Peirce's own argument (Peirce, 1932: 156–73), Jakobson argues that shifters *do* have a single general meaning; for example the personal pronoun *I* always means 'the person uttering *I*'. This makes the shifter a 'symbol'. Jakobson concludes that shifters combine both symbolic and indexical functions and 'belong therefore to the class of INDEXICAL SYMBOLS' (Jakobson, 1957: 132). In this way, Jakobson questions the possibility of a context-free grammar, since the ENUNCIATION is encoded in the statement itself. Also, since grammar is implicated in *parole*, the *langue/parole* distinction is also put into question (see Caton, 1987: 234–7).

Following Jakobson, Lacan uses the term 'shifter' (in English), or 'index-term' as he also calls it (E, 186), to show the problematic and undecidable nature of the *I* (*Je*). However, while Jakobson (following Peirce) defines the shifter as an indexical symbol, Lacan defines it as an indexical signifier. This problematises the distinction between enunciation and statement. On the one hand, as a signifier it is clearly part of the statement. On the other hand, as an index it is clearly part of the enunciation. This division of the *I* is not merely illustrative of the splitting of the subject; it is that split. 'Indeed, the *I* of the enunciation is not the same as the *I* of the statement, that is to say, the shifter which, in the statement, designates him' (S11, 139). Lacan also identifies the French particle *ne* as a shifter (E, 298).

sign (signe) Lacan defines the sign as that which 'represents something for someone', in opposition to the SIGNIFIER, which is 'that which represents a subject for another signifier' (S11, 207). By engaging with the concept of the sign, Lacan sets his work in close relation to the science of semiotics, which has grown rapidly in the twentieth century. Two main lines of development can be discerned within semiotics: the European line associated with Ferdinand de Saussure (which Saussure himself baptised with the name of 'semi-ology'), and the North American line associated with Charles S. Peirce.

1. According to Saussure, the sign is the basic unit of LANGUAGE (*langue*). The sign is constituted by two elements: a conceptual element (which Saussure

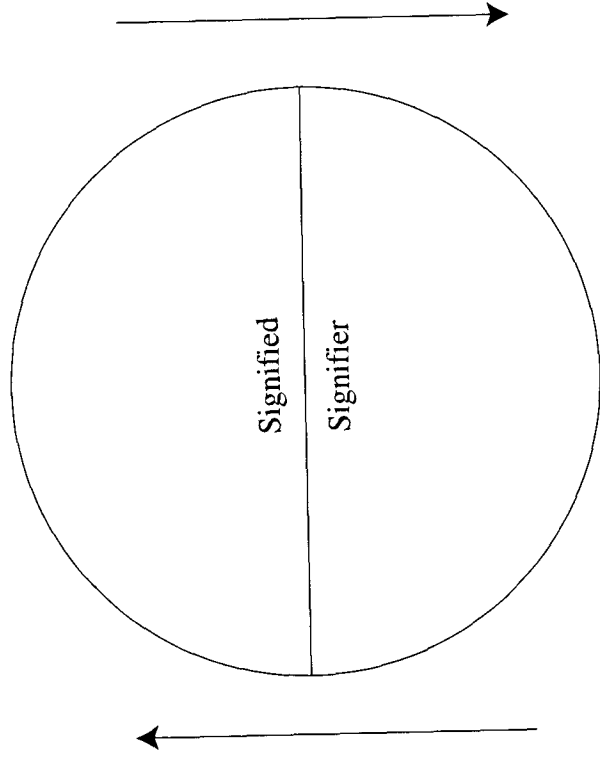


Figure 17 The Saussurean sign

Source: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, 1916.

calls *the signified*), and a phonological element (called *the signifier*). The two elements are linked by an arbitrary but unbreakable bond. Saussure represented the sign by means of a diagram (Figure 17; see Saussure, 1916: 114).

In this diagram, the arrows represent the reciprocal implication inherent in signification, and the line between the signified and the signifier represents union.

Lacan takes up the Saussurean concept of the sign in his 'linguistic turn' in psychoanalysis during the 1950s, but subjects it to several modifications. Firstly, whereas Saussure posited the reciprocal implication between the signifier and the signified (they are as mutually interdependent as two sides of a sheet of paper), Lacan argues that the relation between signifier and signified is extremely unstable (see S11P). Secondly, Lacan asserts the existence of an order of 'pure signifiers', where signifiers exist prior to signifieds; this order of purely logical structure is the unconscious. This amounts to a destruction of Saussure's concept of the sign; for Lacan, a language is not composed of signs but of signifiers.

To illustrate the contrast between his own views and those of Saussure,

Figure 18 The Saussurean algorithm
Source: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1966.

Lacan replaces Saussure's diagram of the sign with an algorithm (Figure 18) which, Lacan argues, should be attributed to Saussure (and is thus now sometimes referred to as the 'Saussurean algorithm' – see E, 149).

The S in Figure 18 stands for the signifier, and the *s* for the signified; the position of the signified and the signifier is thus inverted, showing the primacy of the signifier (which is capitalised, whereas the signifier is reduced to mere lower-case italic). The arrows and the circle are abolished, representing the absence of a stable or fixed relation between signifier and signified. The BAR between the signifier and the signified no longer represents union but the resistance inherent in signification. For Lacan, this algorithm defines 'the topography of the unconscious' (E, 163).

2. According to Peirce, the sign is something which represents an object to some interpretant (the term 'object' can mean, for Peirce, a physical thing, an event, an idea, or another sign). Peirce divides signs into three classes: 'symbols', 'indices' and 'icons', which differ in the way they relate to the object. The symbol has no 'natural' or necessary relationship to the object it refers to, but is related to the object by a purely conventional rule. The INDEX has an 'existential relation' to the object it represents (i.e. the index is always spatially or temporally contiguous to the object). The icon represents an object by exhibiting its form via similarity. Peirce's distinctions between icons, indices and symbols are analytical and not intended to be mutually exclusive. Hence a sign will almost always function in a variety of modes; personal pronouns, for example, are signs which function both symbolically and indexically (see Peirce, 1932: 156–73; Burks, 1949).

Lacan takes up Peirce's concept of the index in order to distinguish between the psychoanalytic and medical concepts of the symptom, and to distinguish between (animal) codes and (human) languages. Lacan also develops the concept of the index along the lines set down by Roman Jakobson in the concept of the SHIFTER, to distinguish between the subject of the statement and the subject of the enunciation.

signification (signification) In Lacan's pre-1950 writings, the term 'signification' is used in a general way to connote both meaningfulness and importance (e.g. Ec, 81). In 1946, for example, Lacan criticises organicist psychiatry for ignoring 'the significations of madness' (Ec, 167; see Ec, 153–4). In the period 1953–7 the term retains these vague associations with the realm of meaning and language, and is thus located in the symbolic order (S4, 121).

It is from 1957 on that Lacan's use of the term takes on a direct reference to the Saussurean concept, and shifts from the symbolic to the imaginary order. Saussure reserves the term 'signification' for the relation between the SIGNIFIER and the SIGNIFIED; each sound-image is said to 'signify' a concept (Saussure, 1916: 114–17). Signification is, for Saussure, an unbreakable bond; the signifier and the signified are as inseparable as the two sides of a sheet of paper.

Lacan argues that the relationship between signifier and signified is far more precarious; he sees the BAR between them in the Saussurean algorithm (see Figure 18, p. 184) as representing not a bond but a rupture, a 'resistance' to signification (E, 164). Firstly, the signifier is logically prior to the signified, which is merely an effect of the play of signifiers. Secondly, even when signifieds are produced, they constantly SLIP and slide underneath the signifier; the only things that detain this movement temporarily, pinning the signifier to the signified for a brief moment and creating the illusion of a stable meaning, are the POINTS DE CAPTON. Signification is, in Lacan's work, not a stable bond between signifier and signified, but a process – the process by which the play of signifiers produces the illusion of the signified via the two tropes of metonymy and metaphor.

Signification is metonymic because 'signification always refers to another signification' (S3, 33). In other words, meaning is not found in any one signifier, but in the play between signifiers along the signifying chain and is therefore unstable; 'it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning insists, but none of its elements consists in the signification of which it is at the moment capable' (E, 153).

Signification is metaphoric because it involves the crossing of the bar, the 'passage of the signifier into the signified' (E, 164). The fundamental metaphor on which all signification depends is the paternal metaphor, and all signification is therefore phallic.

Signification is designated by the symbol *s* in Lacanian algebra (as in the notation *s(A)* which labels one of the main nodes in the graph of desire). The notation for the signified is also *s*, which suggests that for Lacan the term 'signification' (the process by which the effect of meaning is produced) and the term 'signified' (the effect of meaning itself) tend to overlap.

In the late 1950s, Lacan establishes an opposition between signification and meaning (Fr. *sens*). The variety of ways in which these terms have been translated into English provides difficulty for the English reader of Lacan. This dictionary follows the practice of rendering the French *signification* by the English term 'signification', and reserves the English word 'meaning' to translate the French term *sens*.

Signification is imaginary and is the province of empty SPEECH; meaning is symbolic and is the province of full speech. (Later, in the 1970s, Lacan locates meaning not in the symbolic order but at the junction of the symbolic and the imaginary; see Figure 1.) Psychoanalytic interpretations go against

SIGNIFIED

signification and bear on meaning and its correlate, non-meaning (*non-sens*). Although signification and meaning are opposed, they are both related to the production of *jouissance*. Lacan indicates this by coining two neologisms: *signifiance* (from the words signification and *jouissance* – see E, 259; S20, 23), and *jouis-sens* (from *jouissance* and *sens*).

signified (*signifié*) According to Saussure, the signified is the conceptual element of the sign. It is not the real object denoted by a sign (the referent), but a psychological entity corresponding to such an object (Saussure, 1916: 66–7).

For Saussure, the signified has the same status as the SIGNIFIER; both form equal sides of the sign. Lacan, on the other hand, asserts the supremacy of the signifier, and argues that the signified is a mere effect of the play of signifiers, an effect of the process of signification produced by metaphor. In other words, the signified is not given, but produced.

Lacan's view is thus opposed to an expressionist view of language, according to which concepts exist in some pre-verbal state before being expressed in the material medium of language. In contrast to such a view, Lacan asserts the priority (logical rather than chronological) of the material element of language.

signifier (*signifiant*) Lacan takes the term 'signifier' from the work of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. The term was not used by Freud, who was unaware of Saussure's work. According to Saussure, the signifier is the phonological element of the sign; not the actual sound itself, but the mental image of such a sound. In Saussure's terms, the signifier is the 'acoustic image' which signifies a SIGNIFIED (Saussure, 1916: 66–7).

Whereas Saussure argues that the signifier and the signified are mutually interdependent, Lacan states that the signifier is primary and produces the signified. The signifier is first of all a meaningless material element in a closed differential system; this 'signifier without the signified' is called by Lacan the 'pure signifier', though this is a question of logical rather than chronological precedence. 'Every real signifier is, as such, a signifier that signifies nothing. The more the signifier signifies nothing, the more indestructible it is' (S3, 185). It is these meaningless indestructible signifiers which determine the subject; the effects of the signifier on the subject constitute the unconscious, and hence also constitute the whole of the field of psychoanalysis.

Thus for Lacan language is not a system of signs (as it was for Saussure) but a system of signifiers. Signifiers are the basic units of language, and they are 'subjected to the double condition of being reducible to ultimate differential elements and of combining according to the laws of a closed order' (E, 152).

By the phrase 'reducible to ultimate differential elements', Lacan follows Saussure in asserting the fundamentally differential character of the signifier. Saussure states that in language there are no positive terms, only differences (Saussure, 1916: 120).

By the phrase 'combining according to the laws of a closed order', Lacan asserts that signifiers are combined in signifying chains according to the laws of metonymy.

The signifier is the constitutive unit of the symbolic order because it is integrally related with the concept of STRUCTURE; 'the notion of structure and that of signifier appear inseparable' (S3, 184). The field of the signifier is the field of the Other, which Lacan calls 'the battery of signifiers'.

Lacan defines a signifier as 'that which represents a subject for another signifier', in opposition to the sign, which 'represents something for someone' (S11, 207). To be more precise, one signifier (called the master signifier, and written S₁) represents the subject for all other signifiers (written S₂). However, no signifier can signify the subject.

Although the term 'signifier' is absent from Freud's work, Lacan's use of the term focuses attention on a recurrent theme in Freud's writings. Freud's examples of psychoanalytic interpretations constantly focus on purely formal linguistic features. For example, he analyses his own failure to remember the name 'Signorelli' by dividing the word into formal segments and following the associative links with each segment (Freud, 1901: ch. 1). Thus Lacan's insistence that the analyst attend to the signifiers in the analysand's speech is not really an innovation in technique but an attempt to theorise Freud's own method in more rigorous terms.

While it is true that when Lacan talks about signifiers he is often referring to what others would call simply 'words', the two terms are not equivalent. Not only can units of language smaller than words (morphemes and phonemes) or larger than words (phrases and sentences) also function as signifiers, but so also can non-linguistic things such as objects, relationships and symptomatic acts (S4, 288). The single condition which characterises something as a signifier, for Lacan, is that it is inscribed in a system in which it takes on value purely by virtue of its difference from the other elements in the system. It is this differential nature of the signifier which means that it can never have a univocal or fixed meaning (S4, 289); on the contrary, its meaning varies according to the position which it occupies in the structure.

signifying chain (*chaîne signifiante, chaîne du signifiant*)

The term 'chain' is used increasingly by Lacan from the mid-1950s on, always in reference to the symbolic order. At first, in 1956, he speaks not of the signifying chain but of the *symbolic* chain, by which he denotes a line of descent into which each subject is inscribed even before his birth and after his death, and which influences his destiny unconsciously (Ec, 468). In the same year he speaks of 'the chain of discourse' (S3, 261).

It is in 1957 that Lacan introduces the term 'signifying chain' to refer to a series of SIGNIFIERS which are linked together. A signifying chain can never be complete, since it is always possible to add another signifier to it, *ad infinitum*, in a way which expresses the eternal nature of desire; for this reason, desire is



acting out, does not call for interpretation; in itself, it is not a call to the Other but a pure *jouissance* addressed to no one (Lacan, 1962-3: seminar of 23 January 1963; see Miller, 1987: 11). Such comments anticipate the radical transformation of Lacan's thought implicit in his shift from the linguistic definition of the symptom – as a signifier – to his statement, in the 1974-5 seminar, that 'the symptom can only be defined as the way in which each subject enjoys [jouit] the unconscious, in so far as the unconscious determines him' (Lacan, 1974-5: seminar of 18 February 1975).

This move from conceiving of the symptom as a message which can be deciphered by reference to the unconscious 'structured like a language', to seeing it as the trace of the particular modality of the subject's *jouissance*, culminates in the introduction of the term *sinthome*. The *sinthome* thus designates a signifying formulation beyond analysis, a kernel of enjoyment immune to the efficacy of the symbolic. Far from calling for some analytic 'dissolution', the *sinthome* is what 'allows one to live' by providing a unique organisation of *jouissance*. The task of analysis thus becomes, in one of Lacan's last definitions of the end of analysis, to identify with the *sinthome*.

2. The theoretical shift from linguistics to topology which marks the final period of Lacan's work constitutes the true status of the *sinthome* as unanalyzable, and amounts to an exegetical problem beyond the familiar one of Lacan's dense rhetoric. The 1975-6 seminar extends the theory of the Borromean knot, which in the previous seminar had been proposed as the essential structure of the subject, by adding the *sinthome* as a fourth ring to the triad of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, tying together a knot which constantly threatens to come undone. This knot is not offered as a model but as a rigorously non-metaphorical description of a topology 'before which the imagination fails' (Lacan, 1975-6: seminar of 9 December 1975). Since meaning (*sens*) is already figured within the knot, at the intersection of the symbolic and the imaginary (see Figure 1), it follows that the function of the *sinthome* – intervening to knot together real, symbolic and imaginary – is inevitably beyond meaning.

3. Lacan had been an enthusiastic reader of Joyce since his youth (see the references to Joyce in Ec, 25 and S20, 37). In the 1975-6 seminar, Joyce's writing is read as an extended *sinthome*, a fourth term whose addition to the Borromean knot of RSI allows the subject to cohere. Faced in his childhood by the radical non-function/absence (*carence*) of the Name-of-the-Father, Joyce managed to avoid psychosis by deploying his art as *suppléance*, as a supplementary cord in the subjective knot. Lacan focuses on Joyce's youthful 'epiphanies' (experiences of an almost hallucinatory intensity which were then recorded in enigmatic, fragmentary texts) as instances of 'radical fore-closure', in which 'the real forecloses meaning' (seminar of 16 March 1976). The Joycean text – from the epiphany to *Finnegans Wake* – entailed a special relation to language; a 'destructive' refashioning of it as *sinthome*, the invasion

metonymic. The chain is also metonymic in the production of meaning; signification is not present at any one point in the chain, but rather meaning 'insists' in the movement from one signifier to another (see E, 153).

At times Lacan speaks of the signifying chain in linear metaphors, and at other times in circular metaphors:

- **Linearity** 'The linearity that Saussure holds to be constitutive of the chain of discourse applies to the chain of discourse only in the direction in which it is orientated in time' (E, 154).

- **Circularity** The signifying chain is compared to 'rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings' (E, 153).

On the one hand, the idea of linearity suggests that the signifying chain is the stream of speech, in which signifiers are combined in accordance with the laws of grammar (which Saussure calls 'syntagmatic' relationships, and Lacan, following Jakobson, locates on the metonymic axis of language). On the other hand, the idea of circularity suggests that the signifying chain is a series of signifiers linked by free associations, just one path through the network of signifiers which constitutes the symbolic world of the subject (which Saussure designates 'associative' relationships, and which Lacan, following Jakobson, locates on the metaphoric axis of language). In truth, the signifying chain is both of these things. In its diachronic dimension it is linear, syntagmatic, metonymic; in its synchronic dimension it is circular, associative, metaphoric. The two cross over: 'there is in effect no signifying chain [diachronic chain] that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts [synchronic chains] suspended "vertically", as it were, from that point' (E, 154). Lacan thus combines in one concept the two types of relationship ('syntagmatic' and 'associative') which Saussure argued existed between signs, though for Lacan, the relationship is between signifiers, not signs.

sinthome The term *sinthome* is, as Lacan points out, an archaic way of writing what has more recently been spelt *symptom*. Lacan introduces the term in 1975, as the title for the 1975-6 seminar, which is both a continuing elaboration of his topology, extending the previous seminar's focus on the BORROMEAN KNOT, and an exploration of the writings of James Joyce. Through this *coincidentia oppositorum* – bringing together mathematical theory and the intricate weave of the Joycean text – Lacan redefines the psychoanalytic symptom in terms of his final topology of the subject.

1. Before the appearance of *sinthome*, divergent currents in Lacan's thinking lead to different inflections of the concept of the SYMPTOM. As early as 1957, the symptom is said to be 'inscribed in a writing process' (Ec, 445), which already implies a different view to that which regards the symptom as a ciphered message. In 1963 Lacan goes on to state that the symptom, unlike