

$$f(S \dots S') \quad S \equiv S(-) \quad s$$

Figure 10. Formula of metonymy
Source: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1966.

This formula is to be read as follows. On the lefthand side of the equation, outside the brackets, Lacan writes f , the signifying function, which is to say, the effect of signification. Inside the brackets he writes $S \dots S'$, the link between one signifier and another in a signifying chain. On the righthand side of the equation there is S , the signifier, s , the signified, and $(-)$, the bar of the Saussurean algorithm. The sign \equiv is to be read 'is congruent with'. Thus the whole formula reads: 'the signifying function of the connection of the signifier with the signifier is congruent with maintenance of the bar'. The formula is meant to illustrate Lacan's thesis that in metonymy the resistance of signification is maintained, the bar is not crossed, no new signified is produced. Lacan puts his concept of metonymy to use in a variety of contexts.

• **DESIRE** Lacan presents metonymy as a diachronic movement from one signifier to another along the signifying chain, as one signifier constantly refers to another in a perpetual deferral of meaning. Desire is also characterised by exactly the same never-ending process of continual deferral: since desire is always 'desire for something else' (E, 167), as soon as the object of desire is attained, it is no longer desirable, and the subject's desire fixes on another object. Thus Lacan writes that 'desire is a metonymy' (E, 175, emphasis in original).

• **DISPLACEMENT** Lacan also follows Jakobson in linking the metaphor-metonymy distinction to the mechanisms of the dream work described by Freud. However, he differs from Jakobson over the precise nature of this link (see METAPHOR). Just as displacement is logically prior to condensation, so metonymy is the condition for metaphor, because 'the coordination of signifiers has to be possible before transferences of the signified are able to take place' (S3, 229).

MIRROR STAGE (*stade du miroir*) The mirror stage (also translated in English as 'the looking-glass phase') was the subject of Lacan's first official contribution to psychoanalytic theory, when he propounded the concept to the Fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress at Marienbad in 1936 (the original 1936 paper was never published, but a rewritten version appeared in 1949). From this point on, the mirror stage forms a constant point of reference throughout Lacan's entire work. While apparently quite simple, the concept of the mirror stage takes on an ever-increasing complexity during the course of Lacan's work, as he takes it up and reworks it in various different contexts.

The 'mirror test' was first described by the French psychologist and friend of Lacan, Henri Wallon, in 1931, although Lacan attributes its discovery to Baldwin (E, 1). It refers to a particular experiment which can differentiate the human infant from his closest animal relative, the chimpanzee. The six-month-old child differs from the chimpanzee of the same age in that the former becomes fascinated with its reflection in the mirror and jubilantly assumes it as its own image, whereas the chimpanzee quickly realises that the image is illusory and loses interest in it.

Lacan's concept of the mirror stage (as opposed to Wallon's 'mirror test') is far more than a mere experiment: the mirror stage represents a fundamental aspect of the structure of subjectivity. Whereas in 1936-49, Lacan seems to see it as a stage which can be located at a specific time in the development of the child with a beginning (six months) and an end (eighteen months) (see E, 5), by the end of this period there are already signs that he is broadening the concept. By the early 1950s Lacan no longer regards it simply as a moment in the life of the infant, but sees it as also representing a permanent structure of subjectivity, the paradigm of the IMAGINARY order: it is a stadium (*stade*) in which the subject is permanently caught and captivated by his own image;

[the mirror stage is] a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body-image. (Lacan, 1951b: 14)

As Lacan further develops the concept of the mirror stage, the stress falls less on its 'historical value' and ever more on its structural value. Thus by 1956 Lacan can say: 'The mirror stage is far from a mere phenomenon which occurs in the development of the child. It illustrates the conflictual nature of the dual relationship' (S4, 17).

The mirror stage describes the formation of the EGO via the process of identification; the ego is the result of identifying with one's own SPECULAR IMAGE. The key to this phenomenon lies in the prematurity of the human baby: at six months, the baby still lacks coordination. However, its visual system is relatively advanced, which means that it can recognise itself in the mirror before attaining control over its bodily movements. The baby sees its own image as whole (see GESTALT), and the synthesis of this image produces a sense of contrast with the uncoordination of the body, which is experienced as a FRAGMENTED BODY; this contrast is first felt by the infant as a rivalry with its own image, because the wholeness of the image threatens the subject with fragmentation, and the mirror stage thereby gives rise to an aggressive tension between the subject and the image (see AGGRESSIVITY). In order to resolve this aggressive tension, the subject identifies with the image; this primary identification with the counterpart is what forms the ego. The moment of identification, when the subject assumes its image as its own, is described by Lacan as a

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moment of jubilation (E, 1), since it leads to an imaginary sense of mastery; 'the child's] joy is due to his imaginary triumph in anticipating a degree of muscular co-ordination which he has not yet actually achieved' (Lacan, 1951b: 15; see S1, 79). However, this jubilation may also be accompanied by a depressive reaction, when the *child* compares his own precarious sense of mastery with the omnipotence of the mother (Ec, 345; S4, 186). This identification also involves the ideal ego which functions as a promise of future wholeness which sustains the ego in anticipation.

The mirror stage shows that the ego is the product of misunderstanding (*méconnaissance*) and the site where the subject becomes alienated from himself. It represents the introduction of the subject into the imaginary order. However, the mirror stage also has an important symbolic dimension. The symbolic order is present in the figure of the adult who is carrying or supporting the infant. The moment after the subject has jubilantly assumed his image as his own, he turns his head round towards this adult, who represents the big Other, as if to call on him to ratify this image (Lacan, 1962-3; seminar of 28 November 1962).

The mirror stage is also closely related to narcissism, as the story of Narcissus clearly shows (in the Greek myth, Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection).

moebius strip (*bande de moebius*) The moebius strip is one of the figures studied by Lacan in his use of TOPOLOGY. It is a three-dimensional figure that can be formed by taking a long rectangle of paper and twisting it once before joining its ends together (see Figure 11). The result is a figure which subverts our normal (Euclidean) way of representing space, for it seems to have two sides but in fact has only one (and only one edge). Locally, at any one point, two sides can be clearly distinguished, but when the whole strip is traversed it becomes clear that they are in fact continuous. The two sides are only distinguished by the dimension of time; the time it takes to traverse the whole strip.

The figure illustrates the way that psychoanalysis problematises various binary oppositions, such as inside/outside, love/hate, signifier/signified, truth/appearance. While the two terms in such oppositions are often presented as radically distinct, Lacan prefers to understand these oppositions in terms of the topology of the moebius strip. The opposed terms are thus seen to be not discrete but continuous with each other. Likewise, the discourse of the master is continuous with the discourse of the analyst.

The moebius strip also helps one to understand how it is possible to 'traverse the fantasy' (S11, 273). It is only because the two sides are continuous that it is possible to cross over from inside to outside. Yet, when one passes a finger round the surface of the moebius strip, it is impossible to say at which precise point one has crossed over from inside to outside (or vice versa).

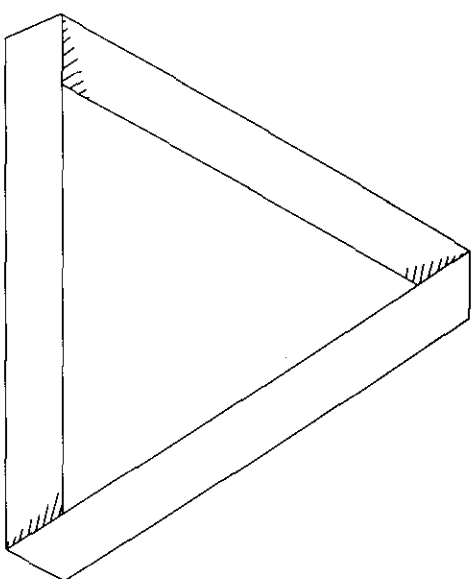


Figure 11 The moebius strip

mother (*mère*) In Freud's account of the OEDIPUS COMPLEX, the mother is the first love object of the child; it is only the intervention of the FATHER, via the threat of castration, which forces the child to give up his desire for the mother. In the work of Melanie Klein, the emphasis shifted from the role of the father to the pregenital mother-child relation; the latter was described as a sadistic relation in which the child makes (in fantasy) vicious attacks on the mother's body and then fears retaliation from her.

In his pre-war writings, Lacan alludes several times to Melanie Klein's work, and describes the cannibalistic fantasies of devouring, and being devoured by, the mother. Lacan argues that the first of the family complexes is the weaning complex, in which the interruption of the symbiotic relation with the mother leaves a permanent trace in the child's psyche. He also describes the death drive as a nostalgic yearning to return to this relation of fusion with the mother's breast (Lacan, 1938: 35).

This view of the mother as an engulfing force which threatens to devour the child is a constant theme in Lacan's work thereafter (see S4, 195; S17, 118). Lacan argues that the child must detach himself from the imaginary relation with the mother in order to enter the social world; failure to do so can result in any one of various peculiarities ranging from phobia to perversion. Since the agent who helps the child to overcome the primary attachment to the mother is the father, these peculiarities may also be said to result from a failure of the paternal function. Hence much of Lacan's work is aimed at shifting the emphasis in analytic theory from the mother-child relation (the preoedipal,