

*An Introductory Dictionary of  
Lacanian Psychoanalysis*

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The IMAGINARY, the SYMBOLIC and the REAL thus comprise a basic classification system which allows important distinctions to be drawn between concepts which, according to Lacan, had previously been confused in psychoanalytic theory. For example Lacan argues that much misunderstanding has arisen in psychoanalytic theory due to a failure to distinguish between the imaginary father, the symbolic father and the real father. Thus Lacan claims that his tripartite classification system has shed invaluable light on Freud's work: 'Without these three systems to guide ourselves by, it would be impossible to understand anything of the Freudian technique and experience' (SI, 73).

The imaginary, the symbolic and the real are profoundly heterogeneous, each referring to quite distinct aspects of psychoanalytic experience. It is therefore difficult to see what they have in common, and yet, the fact that Lacan refers to all three as 'orders' implies that they share some common property. Lacan explores this question of what the three orders have in common by means of the topology of the BORROMEAN KNOT in his 1974-5 seminar. They are not mental forces like the three agencies in Freud's structural model. However, they are primarily concerned with mental functioning, and together they cover the whole field of psychoanalysis.

Although the three orders are profoundly heterogeneous, each order must be defined by reference to the other two. The structural interdependence of the three orders is illustrated by the Borromean knot, in which the severing of any one of the three rings causes the other two to become separated also.

**other/Other (autre/Autre)** The 'other' is perhaps the most complex term in Lacan's work. When Lacan first begins to use the term, in the 1930s, it is not very salient, and refers simply to 'other people'. Although Freud does use the term 'other', speaking of both *der Andere* (the other person) and *das Andere* (otherness), Lacan seems to have borrowed the term from Hegel, to whose work Lacan was introduced in a series of lectures given by Alexandre Kojève at the École des Hautes Études in 1933-9 (see Kojève, 1947).

In 1955 Lacan draws a distinction between 'the little other' ('the other') and 'the big Other' ('the Other') (S2, ch. 19), a distinction which remains central throughout the rest of his work. Thereafter, in Lacanian algebra, the big Other is designated A (upper case, for French *Autre*) and the little other is designated a (lower case italicised, 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 (E, 140), so that he can situate himself in the place of Other, and not of the other (Ec, 454).

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projection of the EGO (which is why the symbol a can represent the little other and the ego interchangeably in SCHEMA L). He is simultaneously the COUNTERPART and the SPECULAR IMAGE. The little other is thus entirely inscribed in the imaginary order. For a more detailed discussion of the development of the symbol a in Lacan's work, see *OBJET PETIT A*.

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

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' (S3, 274). 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 (S8, 202).

In arguing that speech originates not in the ego, nor even in the subject, but in the Other, Lacan is stressing that speech and language are beyond one's conscious control; they come from another place, outside consciousness, and hence 'the unconscious is the discourse of the Other' (Ec, 16). 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' (see SCENE).

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 (see PUNCTUATION). 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, to produce  $\bar{A}$ ; hence another name for the castrated, incomplete Other is the *barred Other*.

The Other is also 'the Other sex' (S20, 40). 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' (Ec, 732).