



The Elusive Nature of Meaning: An Illustrative Study of Language, Gaze, and Ideology in Lacanian Theory

*¹Saurav Kumar Pandey

*¹Research Scholar, T.M.B. University, Bihar, India.

Abstract

This paper explores Jacques Lacan's conception of language as fundamentally flawed in its communicative function, akin to the ambiguity of the gaze. By examining the inherent failures of language to convey precise meaning, this analysis delves into the post-structural notion of an endless deferral of meaning that slides through the letters. It further draws a connection with Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, highlighting the metaphorical parallels between Lacan's unconscious language and Althusser's invisible ideology. The discussion encapsulates the perpetual slide from signifier to signified, illustrating how language, like desire, perpetually chases an ever-elusive meaning, thereby challenging the traditional metaphysics of presence.

Keywords: Language, unconscious, ideology, meaning, letter, gaze, signifier, signified

Introduction

Jacques Lacan's discourse on language presents a radical departure from traditional notions of communication and meaning. In his essay *"The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud,"* Lacan posits that language inherently fails to communicate precisely due to its reliance on pre-existing linguistic structures. So in Lacan's view, we can never precisely say what we want to say. And so, 'meaning' is always in some sense an approximation. He views that all language is produced by failure to communicate. Opening into the discussion we see that Jacques Lacan opens the chapter with an epigraph alluding to the absence of communication between two parties. The sense of failure of language to communicate is a constant theme in this discourse glued to the idea of language. The discourse around language exists prior to the moment of utterance. The discourse around language exists independently of the entry of the subject.

Any utterance is a borrowed expression, which is rooted in a pre-existing milieu of language. This idea is rooted in literary and linguistic theory, specifically associated with the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality is the idea that all texts (including utterances) are interconnected and derive meaning from their relationship to other texts. This concept was significantly developed by Julia Kristeva, drawing on the works of Mikhail Bakhtin. In simpler terms, when we say that any utterance is a borrowed expression rooted in a pre-existing milieu of language, we are suggesting that every piece of language is influenced by and connected to previous uses of language. This is because language exists in a shared

social and cultural context where meanings are constantly being negotiated and redefined. In this view, every utterance can be seen as a kind of quotation, as it inevitably draws upon and echoes the vast body of existing language. This perspective challenges the notion of originality in language, emphasizing instead the communal and derivative nature of communication. But Lacan takes the idea further by stating that language, in reality, is rooted in the linguistic realm rather than a socio-cultural realm.

Language is comparable to gaze. Both language and gaze play a crucial role in constructing our reality. Language shapes our thoughts, beliefs, and understandings of the world. Similarly, the gaze, interprets visual information and influences our perception of reality. Language and gaze are both intersubjective phenomena as language draws us to share our inner thoughts, thus creating a shared understanding, whereas, the gaze, especially in context to social interactions, can draw us to convey emotions, intentions, and meanings without words, creating a non-verbal dialogue between individuals. Just as language can be ambiguous and open to various interpretations, so can the gaze. Language is a key component of our identity, reflecting our cultural, social, and personal backgrounds. The gaze can also reflect identity, but to what extent is the question it keeps with? The image one sees in the mirror, one's own reflection, is alienated from the real image because there is no real image. The act of finding one's reflection in the mirror is the act of misrecognition. The reflected image is not the real image. It is only a representation. It is almost like the idea of time. Time exists. The sun, moon, stars and planets exist. They were formed at

one point and they all will perish at some point. Time exists. Time is also represented through a clock which everyone can have access to. But nobody can have access to time itself. Thus the reflected image like language is only another representation of an idea of reality. Language is the 'other' that always outruns our grasp. Following the metaphor of gaze, language can be projected as a failure of communication and of meaning, which further aligns with the philosophical and theoretical perspectives to understand this concept that gaze too can be misleading.

Words can be ambiguous, context-dependent, and subject to different interpretations by different people, and so can the gaze too, leading to misunderstandings or unintended messages. Some experiences, emotions, and thoughts are difficult or impossible to fully articulate through language. The richness of human experience often transcends the limits of language, leading to a failure in capturing the full essence of what one wishes to communicate. This can be likened to the way a gaze might attempt to express something profound but ultimately fall short ineffably.

Language is structured and systematic, which can constrain the expression of meaning. The rules and norms of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary limit how and what we can communicate. Similarly, the gaze is bound by the physiological and psychological constraints of human perception, sometimes failing to capture or convey complex nuances. From a postmodern viewpoint, language is seen as a flawed and unstable system that can never fully represent reality. This idea aligns with Jacques Derrida's concept of "différance" where meaning is always deferred and never fully present. The gaze, in this sense, can be seen as another flawed medium of perception and communication, always mediated and never wholly capturing the object of its focus.

Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze and language both involve a sense of lack or incompleteness. For Lacan, the gaze represents a desire that is never fully satisfied, and language is an inadequate tool for expressing the unconscious desires and truths of the subject. The absence of a unified communion between language and meaning has opened gaps, and bars and set in motion a world of differences. It has thus catapulted the idea of language into a post-structural world of differences where signifiers and signifieds are demarcated.

Lacan also introduced the concept of the "chain of signifiers," where one signifier leads to another in a continuous chain, influencing the flow of thought and meaning. This chain reflects how the unconscious mind navigates through signifiers, often leading to unexpected connections and revelations. He says that any expression within the sphere of language has meaning only by dint of its difference from other expressions. An expression represents the absence of the object which it signifies. All language is metaphorical and metonymical. Because of the emptiness within language, there is an endless slide from signifier to signifier. The ever-elusive and constant slide of signifier to signifier is comparable to Gilles Deleuze's idea of desire. Desire is an endless thirst. Desire is only defined through endless chasing of signs which designate the absence of the object which is being endlessly chased. Language is like desire. Language is unconscious. The endless chase of an object is represented through the constant sliding of signifier to signifier as a constant fading and evaporation of meaning like a text which is almost unreadable.

Louis Althusser's discourse on instruments of ideology has a metaphorical connection with Lacan's discourse on language. According to Althusser, nation-building or even civilization is

based upon a certain kind of conditioning through preaching and internalization of ideologies. These ideologies are based upon a set of identities. Virtues such as honesty, hard work, perseverance, character are all worshipped while defiance against these elevated ideals is seen as heretic and is suppressed. People vote because they are made to feel that they have free-will. But Althusser questions the very idea of free-will because actions and expressions are not autonomous. They are all borrowed expressions which have their roots in a system of ideologies. But the real ideology itself is invisible. It's absent. Althusser's concept of ideology is in some ways a rethinking of Lacan's concept of language as unconscious.

Jacques Lacan alludes to Rene Descartes statement, "I think therefore I am." The above statement by Rene Descartes is an assertive one. It denotes a metaphysics of presence. It is also aspirational because it tries to evoke a sense of identity or free-will. Lacan does a 360 summersault of the statement and changes it into "I think where I am not and I am not where I think." Lacan is here doing what Iago was doing in Othello (1565) when Iago says "I am what I am not and I am not what I am." Iago is like a signifier who never walks straight like Othello and who never walks like a man, like Othello. According to Lacan, language is a constant slide from signifier to signifier denoting a metaphysics of absence.

Conclusion

Jacques Lacan's examination of language underscores its inherent limitations in conveying true meaning, likening it to the gaze where representation fails to capture reality. The absence of a direct connection between language and meaning results in a perpetual deferral of meaning, with each signifier only understood in relation to other signifiers. This reveals the post-structuralist view of language as an endless chain of metaphors and metonymies, where meaning is always an approximation and never fully grasped. By aligning Lacan's ideas with Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, the discussion highlights the constructed nature of human expressions, challenging the traditional notions of free will and autonomous communication. Thus, language, as portrayed by Lacan, is a complex and flawed system that constantly fails to achieve precise communication, mirroring the elusive nature of desire.

References

1. Lacan, Jacques. "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud." In *Écrits: A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan, 146-178. New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1977.
2. Shakespeare, William. *Othello*, 1565.
3. Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, 1971.
4. Chiesa, Lorenzo. *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007
5. Bowie, Malcolm. *Lacan*. United States, Harvard University Press, 1993.
6. Evers, Tom. "Lacan and the Concept of the 'Real'". United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.