

Elaborate yet Enchanting: Exploring Lacan's Register Theory

Zixin Geng^{1,a,*}

¹Shandong Zibo Experimental High School, Zhangzhou Road, Zhangdian District, Zibo, Shandong, China

a. achenu84754@student.napavalley.edu

*corresponding author

Abstract: The most fascinating psychoanalytic theorist of the 20th century, Lacan, built on Freud's psychoanalytic theory to create a conceptual and all-encompassing framework for psychoanalysis. His theory, which is distinguished by a striking lack of a priori assumptions, has had a significant impact. Lacan's views have influenced generations of philosophers and cultural theorists, resonating in fields as diverse as philosophy, film theory, feminism, literary criticism, and even modern ideological critiques. The core of Lacanian theory, the Register Theory—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—remains, laying the groundwork for his theories of the unconscious, subjectivity, objectivity, and gender differences. The Register Theory stands as Lacan's most enthralling, yet also most intricate and demanding theoretical framework. This article endeavors to systematically expound upon Lacan's perspectives concerning the Imaginary, Symbolic, and the Real, alongside the interplay of these three orders. It embarks on discourse and 'reiteration' of Lacan's triadic orders, striving to craft a tableau of Lacanian theory through these restatements.

Keywords: Lacan, the Real, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

In the early stages of his academic journey, Lacan made his entrance as a 'rebel.' Within his critiques of various mainstream psychoanalytic schools, he articulated his own theories and discourses. From his early paper *The Mirror Stage* to later works like *Écrits*, Lacan endeavored to employ psychoanalytic methods and, building upon Freud's theoretical tradition, to conceptualize the entirety of the human world. This endeavor is not a form of psychological reductionism (that is, reducing all things to human psychological activities), but rather a reconfiguration of the entire human world from a psychoanalytic perspective. the Register Theory—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—holds a central position in Lacanian theory. One can better understand Lacan's idea that the Real is still a pre-symbolic world and can only be retroactively reconstructed through remnants object a, and the Imaginary is characterized by mirrors and misrecognition by starting from the interactions among these three orders and their respective components. Lacan's Register Theory offers considerable assistance for current critiques of ideology and other theories while also facilitating a deeper comprehension of this complex, always changing world.

2. Lacan's Register Theory

The Lacanian Register Theory is a formidable and intricate construct. Its constituent elements, including the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, are inextricably intertwined, creating a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing human reality [1]. Lacan's world is intricate and multifaceted, yet his theories possess a certain enchanting charm, a beauty that is both captivating and directly influential on the unconscious, provoking a profound impact on the deepest recesses of human thought.

2.1 The Imaginary

The discussion of the Imaginary should commence with an exploration of the mirror stage, as the formation of the self is entwined with what Lacan terms the mirror stage. The binary relationship between the self and the specular image constitutes the cornerstone of Lacan's conception of the formation of the Imaginary. The intricate dialectical positioning of the Imaginary can be understood by looking at oneself and the mirror stage. This imaginary world is filled with images and identifications, delusions and distortions, and it is a place where people struggle in vain to achieve an illusory coherence and unity. [1].

In the mirror stage, the infant's primary task lies in distinguishing the external world from its own bodily self. However, the infant's lack of a reference point to discern the self from the external world renders this endeavor nearly impossible. Thus, an entity akin to a mirror (not necessarily a tangible, material mirror, but any reflective "surface" capable of mirroring the infant's image, such as the mother's face, speech, and so forth) needs to be introduced. Through this, the infant can identify with the mirrored image and thereby gain self-recognition. To lay a foundation for the ensuing narrative, permit the author to advance a preliminary viewpoint: this mirror image fundamentally embodies an other, an invasive presence.

The infant pays close attention to its own reflection in the mirror, which results in a sense of satisfaction brought on by the notion of a cohesive and integral body. The infant's first impression of its body is fragmented or broken, therefore the picture it sees in the mirror, which it has some influence over, develops into a full embodiment. The child is enthralled by the image since it perfectly demonstrates the human body's range of motion and its oneness. The infant then starts to grow obsessed with its mirror image and gradually changes into identification. In essence, the infant's identification with the mirror image as its own bodily self [2], or "self-image," stems from the gratification derived from the image's perceived unity. Within this identification, the infant constructs the differentiation between the external world and its own bodily self.

Now is the time to reconcile the previously advanced viewpoint that how does this mirror image function as an other, and why does it carry an element of invasive existence. Primarily, this mirror image essentially constitutes a reflection of the infant's bodily self – a purely external image. The introduction of this mirror image initially presents it as an other external to the infant. As a result, all identification of the infant with this mirror image essentially relies upon the foundational premise that the infant does not perceive the image of its own body as another entity, an other, an entity existing within the mirror. In simple terms, the infant confuses the bodily self with the other, thereby identifying and experiencing its own self within the context of the other's presence [3].

The flawless oneness of the mirror image and the absence of the infant's innate capacity for total bodily unity, however, present an intrinsic contradiction to this identification. This tension still permeates the infant's creative identification process and affects the individual. In essence, the person is steadfastly involved in a conflict with this other. This struggle stems from the fact that the subject's grasp of its own bodily self, and consequently the emergence of the self, are all built upon a foundation where the other occupies the position of the self. Precisely due to this "absence within existence,"

which undermines actual unity, this process of identification remains inherently alienated. In essence, the infant's identification with its own bodily self is an effect of imaginative alienation – a reverse identification stemming from an external image, the mirror reflection [4].

2.2 The Symbolic

Regarding a classic misunderstanding of Lacan, some believe that his theory about the symbolic order and subsequent symbolic aims to encompass all things within the realm of the symbolic. However, Lacan's actual intent is this: once the symbol representing the symbolic order emerges, things start to function and structure themselves according to this symbol and the symbolic order. Even the symbolic topic is susceptible to the symbol's influence. The significance of Lacan's claim that the "unconscious is structured like a language" can be understood through studies of the symbolic order and symbol (including the function of signification and the precedence of signifier).

First and foremost, the concept of symbol, which Lacan derived from structuralist linguists like Saussure, involves the notions of signifier and signified. These symbols operate under a symbolic function, assuming a distinct role within the framework of the "unconscious." The symbolic order upon which these symbols rely simultaneously governs the subject.

In Saussure's terms, the signifier is the so-called "sound image" (the pronunciation and even the spelling of a word in a language, as these symbols always carry a certain auditory image). The signified is the "concept image," referring to the meaning. However, the fact remains that a definitive gap exists between the signifier and the concept or object being referred to [5]. For instance, the word "cigarette" possesses a pronunciation and directly refers to the tangible object, a cigarette. Yet, that sound cannot truly become the object; it merely designates the concept. Thus, within the signifier-signified structure, the referenced object effectively doesn't exist. Simultaneously, the signifier – this auditory image or symbol – only holds meaning within appropriate syntax. "The meaning of linguistic signs appears in the differences between their totality with other signs." For example, when the word "bear" stands alone, it refers ambiguously to both a "bear" and the abstract action of "enduring." This is unclear. But when the sentences "I can't bear that!" and "A bear appeared in front of my face." appear, people easily understand the different meanings of "bear." However, the divergence between Lacan and Saussure lies here: Saussure believes the signified takes precedence over the signifier, as the signified is what genuinely distinguishes and imbues meaning in the signifier. In contrast, Lacan asserts the reverse – the signifier has precedence over the signified.

How is this possible? Isn't it the signified that the signifier genuinely comprehends? The fact is, while the signified designates a meaning, the signifier retains a relative autonomy compared to the signified. The signifier possesses distinct meanings across various languages or even dialects. "Fag" and "cigarette" both refer to cigarettes, but the meaning depends fundamentally on the seemingly unreliable, ever-shifting signifier. It's this autonomy of the signifier that empowers it to dominate the static signified.

And the subject? Here, Lacan employs Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Purloined Letter* to illustrate the predicament of the subject. In essence, the letter continuously circulates among the story's characters – all subjects – and even though their actions revolve around the letter, its content is never truly revealed. Lacan designates this letter as a signifier, and the subjects aren't the ones speaking of the symbolic and the symbolic order; conversely, the symbolic speaks through and structures the subjects [6].

As Althusser elucidates, the subject is not a purely innate entity but is constructed by language, that is, signifier elements. A baby is bestowed with a family name even before birth, hence before it develops into an accepted societal human being. Consequently, it's already identified as a subject of a family or familial ideology, in Althusser's terms [7]. The subject's identity is spoken by signifier, not the subject speaking signifier. The symbolic is a place where symbol and the symbolic order exist.

It delineates the boundaries of human life, being our true reality and the place where our subjectivity is constructed.

2.3 The Real

The Real is undoubtedly one of Lacan's most captivating yet perplexing concepts, for it stands as something unassimilable into the realm of symbolic order, the Symbolic, where human existence unfolds symbolically. Thus, while an abstract notion might be attributed to it, directly comprehending the Real renders it truly elusive. In Lacan's perspective, the Real is a purely formal, non-substantial concept that maintains the slightest distinction from the Symbolic, yet a chasm divides them, rendering them mutually exclusive, though human existence cannot persist in the absence of the Symbolic.

The Real resembles more of an obstacle, an impediment preventing the symbolic order from encompassing its content. In essence, the Real signifies the deficiency, the residue left by the symbolic order's attempt to symbolize everything, a residue Lacan termed: object a.

The paradox of the Real lies in this: if we endeavor to symbolize the Real, we discover that we can no longer recognize it. Thus, this obstruction in the symbolic order becomes the key element maintaining human existence [8]. The symbolic world is not something that people can directly encounter because once it is, it loses its reality. Simply put, removing the distortion can be necessary to reveal the genuine essence hidden beneath. The entity that was warped, however, vanishes when the distortion is eliminated, and it is this retrospective distortion that actually molds the entity. The Real, as a realm before the symbolic, prohibits the symbolic order from touching upon its genuine content.

3 Conclusions

The three registers do not operate as isolated mechanisms; their interplay forms the complex and intricate tapestry of human reality. In this interplay, both the Imaginary and the Real revolve around the Symbolic order. As mentioned earlier, the symbolic order constitutes a realm of symbols, a world of symbolic constructs composed of language. However, the challenge lies in the imperfection inherent in this process of symbolization. The entire system of symbols, this world imbued with signs, is marked by a lack – a failure at the meta-level to fully account for the establishment of these signs and rules. This inherent emptiness within the symbolic order is, in essence, the void within the symbolic itself. As Lacan asserts, it is precisely because the symbolic order is not whole that we can add to it. The incompleteness of the symbolic order allows for its enhancement and, thus, progress [9].

The Imaginary steps in to fill this gap. Human life unfolds within diverse symbolic systems, each with its own vulnerabilities. Yet, people cannot simply reject these systems of symbols. Thus, the imagination of the Imaginary comes into play, serving as the glue that mends the contradictions and gaps within the symbolic realm and fills the voids in a structure [10].

The Real and the Symbolic exhibit two distinct categories of difference – the greatest and the smallest. The greatest difference renders the Real a pre-symbolic nature. Symbolic action fails to capture it, let alone understand it. For the symbolic realm, the real is an ineffable nature, which requires no mediation from the symbolic order to exist in its tranquil state. This pre-symbolic reality lacks no element; it stands as it is.

On the other hand, the smallest difference category introduces a paradoxical conclusion: the difference between a thing and itself is the smallest. This is evident in the disparity between the signifier and the signified object – the signifier can never fully reach the actual signified object, as a thin membrane always separates them. As previously discussed, the real can only be revealed within

the lack (or that thin membrane) inherent in the symbolization process of the symbolic order – in that residue of symbolization.

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