

## **Breaking the Text: An Introduction to Lacanian Discourse Analysis**

This paper aims to lay out a practical, workable approach to discourse analysis which avoids some of the major stumbling blocks and pitfalls of more established and commonly used forms of discourse analysis or textual research. In order to achieve this, as the subtitle of the paper indicates, I have adopted a Lacanian approach. Lacan was not a discourse analyst and there is not already a clearly demarcated and established approach to analysing discourse which would lay claim to the name Lacanian Discourse Analysis. Lacan does, however, offer us a rich array of conceptual tools which seem too promising to pass over and remarkable work has been done already to draw on these tools in the service of discourse analysis, most notably by David Pavon Cuellar (2010) and Ian Parker (2010), who have both been influential on and an inspiration to what follows. The main aim here, however, is to explore the possibility of a discourse analysis in a manner which tries (and inevitably fails) to navigate and foreground some of the major aporiae of textual research. As Lacan's theory seems uniquely suited to this purpose, the paper aims to present what might be understood as the beginnings of a Lacanian approach to Discourse Analysis. This is one sense in which the paper is an introduction. It also functions as an introduction in the sense that it does not presuppose a prior exposure to, nevermind expertise in, Lacanian theory. In order to achieve these aims in the most accessible manner, I have sought to allow the ideas and argument to speak for themselves rather than to be drawn into debates over the veracity of readings of Lacan's writings and seminars. For more detailed discussions of the underpinning theory drawn on here, the reader might find it useful to consult Pavon Cuellar's *From the Conscious Interior to an Exterior Unconscious* or my own *Lacanian Ethics and the Assumption of Subjectivity*.

Beyond the underpinning theory, the paper draws on one example, a text from the Apartheid Archive Project,<sup>1</sup> a project which seeks to collect firsthand accounts of South Africans' early experiences of apartheid. The full text of the narrative to which I refer can be found at the end of the paper. To adumbrate, the narrative relates a woman's memory of a

childhood experience. Some men have arrived at the house to deliver some furniture and the girl is charged with the task of providing them with refreshments. Two of the men are white, three black. There is a dilemma. Under the conventions of apartheid South Africa the choice of drinks and receptacles is not straightforward. What would be appropriate for the white workers would not be appropriate for the black workers. Should she give them glasses of orange juice or cups of tea, or should she use the tin mugs under the sink. The story centres around this dilemma, her failure to successfully resolve it and the feelings this produces in her. Or at least, that is one way of reading the story. Already, inevitably, I have started to interpret, to overlay the story with my understanding of it, to select, to focus. So, let's pause here and consider how we read and we can come back to the mugs.

In considering how to do discourse analysis, I would like to start from a number of simple premises. The first is that discourse analysis is impossible. The second, that it is not as impossible as other forms of social research. And third, that social research is important. It follows from this last point that the impossibilities affirmed in the first two should not be allowed to encourage an abandonment of the project of social discourse analysis. That this might appear initially as a contradiction is hopefully intriguing enough. This contradiction, I argue, ought to function as a spur, an encouragement. Failure and impossibility are not stopping points. As Beckett famously wrote in *Worstward Ho*, 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better' (Beckett, 1983, p.7).

That discourse analysis is impossible may seem to some an objectionable assertion to make. For others it may be baffling. For others still, perhaps it seems banal or perhaps curious. However one takes it, one already inscribes oneself into the assertion. And this is precisely already the problem with discourse and by extension discourse analysis. Put very simply, we imagine we understand each other and, in so doing, we are invariably carried off by this imagining. We bring our imagining to the speech we hear, the text we read, the discourse we engage in. We imagine that what we hear or read, what we consume, carries a meaning and we imagine that we grasp what this meaning is, imagining that this meaning is the same for each of us involved. Even here, as you read my words, I imagine I am *saying* something to you and I imagine, or even hope, you might understand at least something of what I am trying to say. You, on the other hand, perhaps imagine you have understood something of what I have written. Or at least I imagine you do. And to imagine that all these imaginings

are pinned to the same *thing*, well that seems a lot to imagine. I imagine rather that they are so many coloured butterflies, fluttering out of focus and disappearing in disparate directions.

You would be forgiven for suspecting that we are turning here into a postmodern cul-de-sac where relativisms reign and there simply is no truth of language, where anything means whatever you want it to mean. This is not exactly the point. In fact, it is perhaps a point to orient ourselves against. There is a certain, passive, nihilism implied in this stance; there is no meaning, there is no truth, there is no point. On the contrary, there are innumerable meanings, truth must be fought for and the point is precisely to engage in this struggle, which is already a discursive entanglement.

So returning to the premise, discourse analysis is impossible because it is impossible to approach a text, a slice of discourse, without already distorting that text or discourse with the fact of reception. We might describe this in terms of presuppositions, of preconceptions, of prescriptions, or simply in terms of the fact that a text approached is a text approached by someone and, on the flip side, a text not approached by someone isn't a text at all. Words don't have meanings which somehow exist independently of our encounter with those words and thus not only is it not possible, even with the best will in the world, to cleanse one's reception of any discourse of preconceptions but, moreover, it is not possible to receive it as discourse without these preconceptions. The problem is structural. The failure inevitable. But this is not to encourage a retreat from discourse into other modes of enquiry. This, as asserted in our second premise above, is *a fortiori* not possible for the simple reason that all our activities, all our engagements with the world, with each other, with ourselves, are already enmeshed in discourse. For some this is a bold claim. For others it can be experienced as a personal attack. Nonetheless, it seems impossible to deny at least insofar as any such denial cannot but be a recourse to discourse.

When we encounter any text or speech, we imagine we understand each other and we are carried off by this imagining. We identify with characters, feelings, moments or even particular words or phrases in the text. Such moments of identification operate on what we might term the level of the imaginary. Our way of understanding the world always already implies an idea of ourselves, our identification. Such identification need not refer to a fixed

notion. Identification is a process, an unstopping process implicated in every moment of engagement. In encountering the other's words then, we identify with what we find but also find that with which we identify. We do not, of course, find ourselves in the text, for we were not there. We mistake what we find with what we would take ourselves to be. We paint an image of ourselves in our imagination and we paint ourselves into the image we construct in our reception of the other's words. We misrecognise ourselves in the discourse of the other.

And, as soon as we do, we have ceased to read the text *as is* and started to write the text for ourselves.

1. Reading/analysis is a creative process.

Our first principle then is that reading is necessarily a creative process and, if reading is a creative process, then analysis is a creative process. Let's dispense now with the delusion that our reading might produce anything objective. It can't. And to endure in the delusion that it might is only to endure in a delusion. This is not, however, to recoil to a position of *anything goes*. But we need to know, to acknowledge, what we are doing when we read, when we analyse, when we interpret. To assume to access an objective plane which somehow transcends our investment or identification in the text is to deny what we do and, from the off, to produce a disingenuous discourse. We cannot put ourselves out of our reading and to pretend that we can is, well, to pretend. To consume is to identify. The act of consumption is already the act of identification and nowhere more so than in the consumption of discourse. To attempt to read without imagining an identification is to try to read without meaning. Analyses without meaning are possible in the form of formal grammatical or corpus linguistic analysis. But they are without meaning. As soon as argument is applied to them, as soon as meaning is assigned, then there we are, back in the discourse, creating something.

We can formulate this as our second principle.

2. Meaning doesn't inhere in language, it inheres in the act of reading/listening

This leads us to a powerful conclusion which necessarily underpins our first principle (of creativity); the meaning *of* a text always resides on the side of the receiver. The meaning of the text is always *my* meaning. Recognising this problematic relation between text and meaning, between the language produced and operationalised and the meaning attributed to and assumed in and through this production is to point to an irreducible but, equally, unavoidable gap. Meaning is something we must encounter in discourse but it is never simply available as such. If it were, then discourse would be a fixed thing. It would be unitary. That it is not is, then, our third principle.

### 3. There is no universe of discourse.

This assertion, a quote from Lacan's 14<sup>th</sup> seminar, *La logique du fantasme* (unpublished: 16.11.1966), can be understood in a number of interrelated ways. First of all, it points to the fact that no discourse can be made into or turned into one (the literal or etymological meaning of universe is 'turned into one' from *unus*, meaning 'one' and *versus*, the past participle of *vertere*, meaning 'to turn'). This would be to say that there is never any saying it all, that not only are there gaps between the elements of what is said, that there is always something missing, but also that in the telling, in the unfolding of the telling, what comes later can affect the sense of what comes earlier. All knowledge is retroactively constructed or posited. As discourse unfolds, various points arise which furnish a moment of coalescence and coherence, a moment where the jumble of words and associations, denotations and connotations, come together and come to mean something. Meaning is produced and meaning is only ever produced from these points which look back out over what has come before and harness it. Lacan calls these points *points de capiton* after the little buttons that unholsterers use to secure the stuffing to stop it floating about inside cushions. In linguistic terms the *point de capiton* does the same thing. It anchors meaning. It stops a passage of text, a stream of discourse, from meaning too much or meaning nothing at all. The *point de capiton* is that moment of *ah, so that's what he's saying, I get it*. But, of course, such moments are fleeting. Having got it, the discourse is already moving on, more has been added, more insists to be understood, to be brought within a realm of meaning and another *point de capiton* will emerge to look back again and secure a new meaning. And

of course, the meanings secured here are only ever secured for the one receiving the discourse.

That ‘there is no universe of discourse’ also, then, on a grander scale, points to the fact that knowledge is neither finite nor permanent. In any field there has always been more to know. Seemingly sound theories give way to more coherent or convincing explanations. Communities confer truth on certain facts but history would seem to teach us that assuming certainty in any of these would seem to be naive. At any one time, we do not know it all and all we know may, in time, lose its place. Add to this that no witness ever sees it all and, moreover, we refract the world through discourse and in the process will choose different words which are then, in turn, received with different meanings. Discourse does not become one with the world which is, rather, only ever redoubled through discourse and imaginings. Amongst other things this points to an important dimension of discourse analysis; there are always other interpretations.

That there is no universe of discourse also, through all these senses, is another way of saying that the sphere of language, in its broadest sense, is still finite; it does not cover everything. This finitude should be understood in two quite different ways. On the one hand, it is to point to the insistence of something beyond discourse, something which cannot be or has not been captured in language. It is also to point to an internal limitation to language, that there is always, as indicated above, an element of identification haunting language. That there is no universe of discourse is to say that language never covers it all and that even that which it does cover is, so to speak, perforated by an extra-linguistic intrusion without which it could never function for us.

Lacan theorises these three points of convergence – the finitude of language, the insistence of a beyond of discourse and the necessity of a subjective interstice for any of this to come to mean anything - as three distinct but intertwined realms of experience which he terms the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. The symbolic is perhaps the most straightforward of the three to define. It refers to the function of structuration, to the fact that our experience is ordered through systems of equivalence and differentiation. In a simplified but apposite sense, then, it refers to language, but its scope is broader too as it refers to social organisation and the logic which makes social organisation and linguistic and social

exchange possible. In terms of discourse, then, to refer to the symbolic would be to refer to the stuff of language, the words and phrases which make up a particular chunk of discourse, but also the grammar, associations and structures which make the discourse possible.

What the symbolic does not include is meaning. Imagine the scenario wherein you wish to find out the meaning of a word. Let's say the word 'mug'. Your immediate response may be to type 'define mug' into Google (or to look it up in a dictionary). What you will find is a definition of the term which is composed of other words, such as 'A heavy cylindrical drinking cup usually having a handle' (thefreedictionary). If you then sought the definition of 'cup' you would likely be led to a reference to 'container' which, in turn, would lead you to a reference to 'receptacle' which, in a circular movement, would take you back to 'container'. Words are defined in terms of other words in what is, in this sense, a closed system. This system is the symbolic. To discern or assume meaning in a word or collection of words implies the convergence of the symbolic on another of the realms Lacan delimits, that of the imaginary.

The imaginary is the realm of meaning. Earlier I wrote of how when we encounter another's speech, another's discourse, we imagine that we understand what the other is trying to say. This, in simple terms, is Lacan's order of the imaginary. It is the realm of identification, insofar as what is happening when I assume to understand or grasp the meaning what is being said I have necessarily come to place an idea of myself into the discourse in question. To think that I have understood you, is to assume an identity between you in your position of speaker and me in my position of listener. But it is also then to assume to have a grasp of myself too. For Lacan these points of imagining are always illusions, although as illusions they are necessary. We cannot not identify but these moments of identification never touch grasp or present reality as such.

Reality for Lacan, as is perhaps becoming clear, is a somewhat problematic concept. Reality as we experience it is always the combination of both the symbolic and imaginary. Even when we are not directly or overtly concerned with discourse, discourse is at work, framing and constructing how we perceive the world. There is no escaping the symbolic and, thus, never any access to a pre-symbolic or asymbolic world. Similarly, there is no experience of the world which is not affected by identification. There is no escaping the imaginary realm.

In this sense, the reality of experience is always an experience mediated and distorted through imaginary prisms and symbolic frames. The symbolic and imaginary are not, however, even in combination, ever totalising. There is always that which escapes their reach and insists from elsewhere. This elsewhere, this beyond of symbolisation and identification is what Lacan terms the real. That the real cannot be grasped in itself does not stop it impressing but even this impressing will be, sooner or later, transformed through imaginary and symbolic processes.

Whenever we deal with discourse we are necessarily dealing with the intertwining of imaginary, symbolic and real elements. This necessity is absolute and affirming this necessity is perhaps the core step in being able to engage in a discourse analysis that can avoid the blindness or violence which threaten to close down the analysis. Whenever we encounter a discourse, spoken or written, we encounter the materiality of the signifier, the weave of grammar, the conventions of syntax, the possibility of what can and cannot be said in a particular language. But the encounter remains meaningless without the intrusion of imagination which feeds on and bounces off the language itself, conjuring connections and identifications. Without a subject's engaging with a creating meaning with it, there can be no meaning to the text. And nothing solidifies, at least not for long. The chain of signifiers moves on, more words are added, both text and context can always be expanded and the identifications assumed remain fragile, uncertain. Something in the discourse refuses recuperation. There is no saying it all and there is no getting it all and this *not all* is the impress of something beyond, the real that escapes discursive capture.

We might represent this as follows. Recall our story in which the woman remembers a childhood incident involving some tin mugs. What are these tin mugs? On the level of the symbolic, we have the words, what Saussure calls 'sound images' (Saussure, 1983: 3), **tin mugs**. A sound image is the substrate to the particular material instance of a word or signifier, the conveying dimension which allows us unthinkingly to get, at least within reason, that **tin mugs** is **tin mugs** whether it is said in a South African or Scottish accent, whether it is in Calibri or Times New Roman. This signifier can be distinguished from other similar signifiers; it is neither **tin soldiers** nor **porcelain mugs**, nor is it **glasses** or **cups**. But having distinguished the **tin mugs**, how might we imagine them? This necessarily depends on the audience. Some might imagine bare tin, or perhaps mugs painted bright colours and

adorned with animals, perhaps a plainer white with a blue or green rim or a peeling red. Perhaps. But no amount of imagining touches on the particular mugs as remembered (which is a form of imagining) by the woman telling the story. At least two gaps present here. No amount of imagining crosses the gap between imagined identification - *I know the mugs she's talking about* – and the mugs she is talking about. Moreover, no amount of imagining, hers or mine, closes the gap between imagining and the mugs themselves, which remain always beyond the picture, beyond the text, in the real.

Importantly here, we should understand that the process of identification or meaning creation here is not an arbitrary one. There is no suggestion that the signifier **tin mugs** can simply be made to mean anything. To suggest this would be to entertain non-sense. And yet at the same time we cannot constrain the meaning. The elasticity, the particular stretch of sense, depends always on the receiver. **Tin mug** does signify something (at least for some of us). What precisely it signifies depends on the imagination of the receiver, depends on what the receiver imagines when confronted with this signifier. While we would probably imagine some family resemblance between the different tin mugs imagined, the differences between these could also be quite significant. A mug is a receptacle for drinking. But it can also refer to a human face. Fans of *The Wizard of Oz* may well imagine a tin mug of quite a different type. There is necessarily a tension here, then, between the fact that it could mean *anything* at all and that it doesn't mean simply *anything*.

This brings us from those principles underpinning an analysis to the beginnings of a practice. If discourse consists in three realms, the symbolic, the imaginary and the real, then our analysis of the discourse must start by disconnecting these.

#### 4. Separate imaginary readings from symbolic readings

We ought to understand this not as a simple moving apart but, rather, as partaking of a double movement; the separating of the imaginary readings *and* the separating of the symbolic readings. Both are crucial. To separate the symbolic reading would be to pay attention to the detail of the text, to go back constantly to the text and maintain a fidelity to what is actually there; **mugs** is **mugs** and not cups or glasses. What is actually said? What words? What order? What context in the text? Separating and focusing on the symbolic of

the text is the careful work of noting what is there and in what order. It is the observation of lexical choice, of syntax, of sentence structure, of punctuation. But it may also include the observation of elision or omission. It is, in short, the careful mapping of the text. But this is, crucially, a mapping without meaning, which brings us to the considerably more difficult task of separating our imaginary readings. How do we switch off our intuitive grasp of the text, the meanings or identifications which spontaneously arise as we encounter the text? She says 'mugs', I think mugs, an image forms. How do I close the image down and erase it? Well, I don't. To assume I could would be to collapse again into the arrogance of blindness. All I can hope to do is to decentralise the image in my imagining, to add further images, to force the notion that this is not *it*. I need above all to accept that my imaginary identification with the author is nothing but my imaginary identification with the author, that my grasp is feeble and only one amongst an endless proliferation of possibilities.

It helps here to appreciate that the loose coherence of meaning associated around a discourse tends to be held in place by a governing term, a master signifier, which may or may not be expressly present in the discourse. This master signifier is that term (so, itself a part of discourse) which allows the other terms of a discourse to operate together and to assume (or be assumed to have) a degree of naturalness. 'Raindrops on roses, whiskers on kittens and bright copper kettles' is a fairly meaningless list unless you happen to be familiar with *The Sound of Music*, in which case it immediately makes sense and suggests some brown paper packages tied up with string. In a not too dissimilar way, a tin mug is little more than a drinking receptacle unless you are familiar with apartheid South Africa whereupon it assumes a more powerful and more complex significance. Although we should be cautious here; to suggest that it is necessarily more *anything* is really to suggest too much. It is different. And this is perhaps one point of danger where we can tend to assume a natural or realistic, commonsense presence of a master signifier. This is one way in which discourses come to be tethered to a particular imaginary structuration which pretends to be real. An example here was provided, to comic effect, by the Volkswagen series of commercials *See Film Differently* where various film-goers present their eccentric takes on popular movies. One man puts forward his thesis that *Ghostbusters* is a film about weight-loss, supporting his interpretation with various examples from the film – the logo is a barred fat white man, the demon enters the world through a fridge etc. Most of us will have seen the film as a

comedy about the paranormal, about ghosts and spirits. He sees the film about weight-loss. Two competing master signifiers. What the master signifier does is provide a cohesion to make sense of the discourse in play. A crucial stage in the analysis is therefore to isolate potential master signifiers.

### 5. Isolate potential master signifiers

Being able to point to the master signifiers potentially operant in relation to a discourse allows us to understand something of how this discourse might be received by particular communities. It can also allow us to disentangle connotations which can otherwise appear natural. Of course sometimes one master signifier imposes itself to the exclusion of all others. The danger here is in thinking that this is a necessary state of affairs. Even with something like the example of *My Favourite Things*, we should appreciate the contingency of the connection. There is always space to ask what other master signifiers might be operant here. Sometimes the answers will appear trivial (a judgement of course and not a natural state of affairs) while at others it will open the way for new readings, new understandings, new ways forward. Obviously this links with the notion of imaginary identification and this leads again to the point that reading and analysis are always creative processes. Which leads us to another principle.

### 6. There is no such thing as a metalanguage

Were we to assume to have found the actual master signifier, the true master signifier, then we would be assuming to have somehow stepped outside of the discourse and looked in. We would have assumed somehow the possibility of a discourse outwith discourse. Isolating the master signifier is never a simple right or wrong procedure. We might imagine that there is a single correct answer but if knowledge is neither finite nor permanent nor universal, then no one master signifier could exist. The very process of isolating or naming the master signifier itself both takes place within and affects the discourse. That is to say, while there is no universe of discourse, it is also not possible to somehow step outside discourse.

The issue of naturalisation and how this ideological effect functions can be understood through the basic structure of discourse in operation. Lacan (2007) presents us with a simple

framework onto which we can lay and, thus, through which we can begin to construct understandings of aspects of any discursive encounter. Practically speaking this can be understood as our main stage.

## 7. Mapping the discourse

As a starting point, we have four structural positions:

agent → other

truth // product

In the top left-hand corner we have the position of the agent of the discourse, the position from which the discourse would appear to emanate. We may think of this as the speaker or the author, but it can also, and perhaps more accurately and helpfully, be understood as the ideology, tradition or convention from which the discourse can be seen to emerge. That is to say, we should not jump to posit the concrete speaker as the prime mover of their 'own' discourse. Other forces are at work. This agent addresses another, addresses someone or something or some place outside itself. The agent, however, does not begin from nothing, does not speak from nowhere. The agent's discourse is underpinned, motivated or supported by a certain truth. Phrased otherwise, something occupies the position of truth for every discourse produced. At the other end of what we might describe as a trajectory, lies the product of the discourse. A discourse is never contained in the transmission from agent to other. There is always a remainder, an excess. There is always that which escapes or is produced as a result of the discourse. We have seen this in the notion of imaginary identification. A discourse is encountered but a meaning emerges beyond what could strictly be said to have been in the discourse. So, the speech or text produced by the agent of the discourse stands in a particular relation to a certain conception of truth. But, crucially, the product of the discourse - the effect, the understanding, the meaning - is never adequate to this truth. This is the significance of the double bar (//) on the bottom line of the schema which indicates impotence. The arrow on the top Lacan marks as impossibility. Discourse always fails. The circle is not complete.

Lacan's argument is that these spaces, the markers of these spaces, remain the same for every discourse, they describe the structure of discoursing. There are, of course, different forms of discourse and these emerge by populating the spaces of the schema to form

different social or discursive relations. Lacan delimits four potential elements which can fill the four spaces in different permutations, always in the same sequence, thus producing four different models of discourse.<sup>2</sup> The four elements are:

\$ - the barred subject. The subject, or person, for Lacan is always barred in the sense that it is incomplete, divided non-self-identical. If we recall the earlier discussion of the symbolic, imaginary and real, this helps us to grasp something of this splitting. Just as we can never know the world around except in the partial refractions of language and the domination of identification, so too we can never know ourselves. Rather we experience ourselves in bits, in reflections; both symbolic and imaginary. This is not to suggest that a real self is somehow ever present behind or before these refractions and reflections. For Lacan, the refractions and reflections are what there is. We form an identity from these. Beyond them is the real which is necessarily impersonal. For further definition and discussion, see Homer (2004), Fink (1995) or Neill (2011).

S<sub>1</sub>- the master signifier. This is the dominant, ordering and sense giving signifier of a discourse as it is received by the community or audience.

S<sub>2</sub> - the chain of signifiers. This is what is ordered by or set in motion by S<sub>1</sub>. It is knowledge, the existing body of knowledge, the knowledge of the time. It is what it is possible to think ... which is not to suggest that we cannot or should not think the impossible.

a - *objet petit a*. The lower case *a* in Lacan's work is what is referred to as *objet petit a*, a complex concept relating to the formation of the subject, subjective experience and the inter-relation of the symbolic, imaginary and real. Put simply, *objet petit a* is the supplement to the incompleteness and impossibility of the subject. It is the correlate to the subject's status as necessarily inadequate to itself and the impossibility of subjective self-sufficiency. In this sense, *objet petit a* is that which is other to the subject and as such is that which motivates desire. However, if we keep in mind that subject is not incomplete as a result of a previous completeness having been disturbed or broken, that it only ever was at all as incomplete, then we can see that this *objet petit a* is not something actual with substantial existence. The subject

seeks *objet petit a*, but what it seeks can never be found because it never was *something* to be found. As that which is split off, *objet petit a* presents a sense of remainder or leftover which is important in the context of discourse analysis. It is never possible for any discourse to say it all, as we have seen, and thus there is always something which escapes. This something is *a*. The small *a* also represents *autre*, the other, or other person. What we often experience ourselves as split off from, what we often desire to make us feel complete, is another person. Our desire, however, cannot be directed towards the other person as such. Our desire is only ever directed towards an idea, a fantasy of that other person. So *a* is that which would, in fantasy, make us complete, it is our fantasy of another, but also then that which escapes in encounter with the other and that which escapes the discourse of the other or any discourse at all. The *a*, then, is the unsaid which points to that which is beyond existing knowledge or knowability. It points towards the real.

In populating the basic framework with these elements, we can begin to describe different forms of social relation which can in turn help us to understand the functioning of the text we seek to explore.

When the master signifier occupies the position of truth, it holds meaning in place. Knowledge becomes certain – or better said, knowledge is accepted as certain. Knowledge then addresses its other, the unknown or the materiality of the real, and this in turn produces the subject as alienated (hence the bar through the S of subject;  $\bar{S}$ ). One way of understanding this would be in the classic Marxist paradigm of alienated labour (Marx, 1983). When capitalism works it can be understood as the system which appears not to be a system, appears naturalised and unquestionable. What, after all, could you have without capitalism? Doesn't social exchange theory demonstrate, after all, that this *is* how we operate. Of course someone has to profit; that's how it is. Capitalism itself, as the truth, secures this knowledge, this certainty that this is the way it is and has to be. The discourse is then addressed to the mass, the consumer, producing the subject who can never be satisfied, the subject who is enjoined to buy and yet for whom the commodity is never *it*.

$$\begin{array}{c} \underline{S_2 \rightarrow a} \\ S_1 // \$ \end{array}$$

Turning to our story of the girl and the workmen in South Africa, the whole dilemma of the mugs - the weight of the significance of choosing between the receptacles - becomes understandable when the master signifier **white superiority** is brought into play. Placing **white superiority** in the position of truth allows us to understand the very possibility of the story. That is, unless we accept the accepted status of the truth of **white superiority** the story cannot start to make a certain sense. This is not to say anything of the moral value of the scenario described. There is a neutrality at play here. What is presented is 'simply' knowledge. It is when the master signifier is underpinned by subjective endorsement that a value starts to accrue. With the master signifier in the position of truth a certain body of knowledge, a perspective on the world, i.e. South African apartheid, is held in place. This knowledge, this system, this way of understanding the world says that black South Africans are not of the same value as white South Africans and, therefore, *cannot* be treated the same. In terms of this discourse, this is a fact. For those operating or living under or within this discourse, this is treated as a fact. For a black girl to swim in a white swimming pool would have been unthinkable. For white men to drink from black men's cups would have been unthinkable. This knowledge, this way of seeing, the discourse of apartheid with its laws, written and unwritten, then addresses its other, the populace, the Afrikaner, the Xhosa, the Indian, the Cape Coloured, the Tswana, the Tsonga, the European, the Zulu, etc. And although, of course, it also addresses the world beyond its borders, it does so in a distinctly different way. For the subject of apartheid, apartheid was what was. What holds the assumption of **white superiority** in place is its endorsement by this subject. This is not to suggest that it has to be advocated by subject, but it has to be taken as the reality of the situation. This endorsement is represented by a turn of the symbols, placing the subject in the position of truth under the master signifier.

$$\begin{array}{c} \underline{S_1} \rightarrow \underline{S_2} \\ \$ // a \end{array}$$

That is to say, without a subject (or subjects) to *believe* in it, the master signifier cannot hold the position of agent. When we all believe the Emperor's new clothes are splendid garments, he can parade with dignity around the town. When we start to doubt, he appears naked, ridiculous. Hans Christian Andersen's tale is useful here in that it underscores the

point that the belief referred to here is not in anyway a straightforward conscious endorsement or choice. The notion of subjectivity here is as constituted in itself division by the very symbolic weave which it then underpins. The subject in no way precedes the master signifier but, at the same time, the master signifier cannot function without (unconscious) subjective support. We might think here, in a different regime, of Ceausescu on the balcony of the Central Committee Building in the winter of 1989. In a moment the crowd, who could not have thought of doing so before, starts to jeer. The mighty ruler turns, confused, his face falls, the world is not the same. He is naked. The crowd before him can never be the same again. The change may not erupt so dramatically in a moment but it can come and retroactively from this point we can begin to see that what was so sure and certain is in fact an illusion only ever held in place by what we chose, even if we don't think we had chosen to choose that.

While belief remains in place, the master signifier remains in place to author laws, to construct ideology, to make sense of the ways in which it would be possible to describe that world. Of course, such making sense is never entirely successful and excesses are produced; a sense escapes, contradictions abound and an opposition is created. Without apartheid holding the place it held, figures such as Steve Biko or Nelson Mandela and the millions of less heralded others would not have emerged as they did.

While the location of the subject underpinning the  $S_1$  is what guarantees the 'obviousness' or 'unquestionableness' of the social expectations that are being played out, it is only when we have a further rotation and place the subject in the position of agent that the value or acceptability of the social structures is brought into question.

$$\begin{array}{c} \underline{\$} \rightarrow \underline{S_1} \\ a // S_2 \end{array}$$

Here we can understand that the truth of the situation is rendered unstable. The subject, driven by uncertainty ( $a$ ), questions the authority of the master. The subject questions that which would have been seen to guarantee the structures in place. The subject, in addressing the master of the discourse, no longer accepts things as they are or seem to be. Why must it be like this? Can it not be otherwise? What grounds these claims? Why? Why? Why? The

unknown (*a*) fuels the subject and, of course, then, at the other end, this produces new knowledge, new possibilities and always more discourse.

It is, therefore, not simply a matter of isolating the master signifier or positing different potential master signifiers. We need to locate the master signifier dynamically in relation to the other factors of the discourse being played out. Working through each rotation of the graph, we need to place the master signifier of our choice and construe the other elements accordingly. We should also consider the other elements as primary and allow them to suggest other ways of seeing the master signifier and each other.

How does this way of figuring the subject affect how we see the other? How or as whom, with each turn of the graph, might we understand the subject of the text. Do we see the subject as the author, the agent? We are habitually inclined to posit an author behind the text and the constructing or imagining of such a figure is perhaps one of the easiest instances of identification to fall for. In an attempt to help avoid this trap, it can be useful to invert the commonsensical idea which would posit the relation as author → text and, rather, look for how the text constructs the subject who would be taken to be its author. This leads immediately, then, to a splitting insofar as the ‘author’ of the text is always already two; the one who literally wrote the words on the page (or the one who spoke) and the one who reads (or hears) those words and fills them with meaning. We need to consider both. That is to say, we can then consider the subject, whether author or reader, as the product of the text, the one transformed through this discourse.

Similarly, we should ask what body of knowledge, what chain of signifiers is in play here? What convention of discourse is speaking here? Take, for example, the widespread phenomenon of depression. Typically this phenomenon (and even naming it depression is already to slip into this) will be construed in a medical discourse which speaks to its depersonalised other, the depressed, producing a subject divided from itself, inadequate to its description and cleaved from its cause. *My depression*, we say, as though there were some entity in us yet other to us. Then shifting this body of knowledge to the place of other, we can ask who speaks to it, who adds to the body of knowledge in such a way that is but its maintenance? For example, we might consider how the APA produces new versions of the DSM not so much as new models of the varieties of human consciousness or thought but as

tinkerings which sustain the basic model from before. It is only when the subject revolts and questions the authority of these models that genuinely new knowledge is produced with  $S_2$  in the bottom right-hand corner.

In each of these configurations, we need to consider how we posit that which is other to discourse, the remainder, the ineffable, the incomprehensible. If we posit  $a$  as the unarticulated truth of the discourse, how might this determine our understanding of the subject as agent? To what other does knowledge speak? What uncontrollable excess is produced by this discoursing? Importantly, if  $a$  is the ineffable, the unthinkable, if it is that which constantly escapes, and yet haunts and remains inseparable from, even while being foreclosed from, the manifest discourse, uncovering it appears to be an impossible venture. It is this impossibility which we marked at the outset. There is no universe of discourse. And yet we might construe the search for, the striving to uncover  $a$  as the very work of discourse analysis. Like a black hole,  $a$  cannot be detected and grasped in itself, cannot be discovered. It can, however, like a black hole, be delimited by that which surrounds it. What is evident in the discourse points to what cannot be said and, in short, this is the work of analysis. It is, then, an interminable work, through which permutations will be produced and, as they are, understandings will be multiplied.

<u>Discourse of the University</u>	<u>Discourse of the Master</u>	<u>Discourse of the Hysteric</u>	<u>Discourse of the Analyst</u>
$S_2 \rightarrow a$	$S_1 \rightarrow S_2$	$\$ \rightarrow S_1$	$a \rightarrow \$$
$S_1 // \$$	$\$ // a$	$a // S_2$	$S_2 // S_1$

It is worth repeating another point from above; there is no metalanguage. Throughout the process of analysis we are still engaged ourselves in discourse. That is, through the permutations we produce in seeking to explore and explode the text, we are still in discourse. This can be understood in the final of the four discourses, appropriately enough, the discourse of the analyst. Like the psychoanalyst from which the schema takes its name, the discourse analyst should strive as far as possible (although we know it is not possible) to occupy something of a non-position. As discussed earlier, we cannot hope to suspend our identifications with the text. We can try but we always run the risk of delusion. We can, however, push through by generating more and more identifications and consequently

unsettling the primacy of our initial identifications and holding all as possibilities (here, on a practical level, it helps to work with other people). So, while striving to occupy a non-position, the analyst is still underpinned by the knowledge of language, of discourse, which motivates and troubles and makes possible his or her endeavour. S/he addresses the text as an incomplete subject, seeking to understand without seeking to impose and, through doing so, produces new understandings, new meanings, which is to say, meanings which are not in the text as such.

In repeatedly mapping aspects of the text to the elements of discourse, in considering the various challengers to the seat of master signifier, we generate competing possible understandings. We explode the text. We untether it and decentred it. We multiply our perspectives on it. I suggested above that the master signifier in relation to the story of the girl and the mugs can be understood as **white superiority**. We might, however, revisit this and see it a different way. The master signifier could be seen to be the maternal voice and we could start to understand the story as a story of a young girl's becoming woman. The point is not to uncover the singular truth of the story. It is not even the case that these readings are incompatible with each other. The point is to explore meanings and disrupt our initial locked reading.

The approach outlined here is, however, nothing more than an introduction, a beginning, a way to begin to explore texts or discourses. It is a beginning which helps us to avoid the trap of illusory mastery so evident in so many practices of discourse analysis or textual research. To move beyond this, to move deeper into the ways in which language and subjectivity interact, to negotiate greater levels of theory, more robust and complex ways of thinking and rethinking what is going on, this is the real work, the work to follow.

## The Text

N29

Female

White

Forties

There was no single ‘big moment’ of heroic realization – rather a very small, even insignificant experience. I remember being about seven or eight years old, in 1968. Something large was being delivered at our house – could it have been furniture, or building materials? After the truck had been in our driveway some time, with three men unloading stuff from the back, my mother asked me to take out something to drink. It was summer and very hot. There was no ‘nanny’ around, to do this – perhaps it was a Thursday afternoon – the traditional “day off” for female domestic workers. My mother was lying down, I think - ill perhaps, or simply tired – and I was anxious about getting it right.

I had watched my mother and our nanny setting out trays with drinks or tea countless times before. So I put on the kettle, found the tray, a tray cloth, the cups and saucers, the silver teaspoons and sugar bowl, the teapot and milk jug covered in a pattern delicate roses. At this point, my mother came into the kitchen. I could see her becoming inexplicably angry as she looked at the tea tray, laden with the ‘best’ china. “Don’t be ridiculous!” she may have said – or words to this effect.

It took a short while for me to realize what I had done wrong. The men outside were not family, or friends. They were not ‘like us’. Of the five men, three were black. Black people did not ever come into our house as visitors; nor were they offered tea out of the special rose-covered cups. But even the two white men, who leant against the front of the trucks, smoking and chatting to one another while the black men unloaded, were not ‘like us’. They wore shorts, socks and sandals, checked shirts stretched over large stomachs. They spoke a different Afrikaans to what we spoke at home – rougher, more guttural perhaps. They watched the black men in the hot sun through narrowed eyes. I could call them ‘meneer’.

The black men looked like all black men, to me. They wore dirt-coloured overalls; they bent wordlessly to their task, their faces covered in a sheen of sweat. I did not know how to speak to them – I did not know their names. I could not call them ‘meneer’; certainly not ‘oom’ – what then? Best to pretend they were not there.

I was faced with a dilemma. Clearly, the china and the tray cloth had to be abandoned. The easiest option was the bright orange bottle of Oros from the grocery cupboard. What troubled me was how to present the drinks to the men outside. I looked at the glasses in shining rows on the shelf. These glasses were for us – the family, the friends who came to play tennis on Sundays, or to swim in the pool in summer. No black person ever used these glasses – not even our nanny, who washed those glasses every day and packed them in the cupboard shelves. It would be all right for the two white men outside to use these glasses.

In the cupboard below the sink was a set of mugs. They were bright red, and made of tin. These were the mugs used by the nanny and the gardener. These were the mugs that could be given to the black men unloading the truck.

Unexpectedly, suddenly, I was flooded with a sense of acute shame. I did not want to set out two glasses (for the white men) and tin mugs for the blacks. I couldn't face the moment when I would have to set down the tray, on a stone table in the garden – and would see their faces looking at the tray, so clearly mapped out and divided – tin mugs one side; glasses the other.

I imagine I bit my nails (a habit in those days). Then I made my decision. I took out five tin mugs. I poured and mixed the Oros. I picked up the tray (minus tray cloth) and walked out, feet like lead, gingerly balancing everything – eyes down. I felt deeply self-conscious. I was no longer ignorant – I felt implicated: I thought about the nannies and gardeners who congregated on pavements of white suburbs on Sundays; about how, at school, we stood up politely when a teacher came into the class, but not when the cleaner came in; about the lines of people (all black) who waited for the rare 'black' busses on Oxford road, while we roared past in our car, to school, to town. Later, I thought about the polite white boy on the train to Cape Town who had said 'naand, Oom' to the man who brought the bedding, and got a 'klap' from his mother. Suddenly all these things were connected to the mugs and glasses in our kitchen – the glasses up on a high shelf, the mugs below the sink. And at this moment I felt, at a visceral level, my whiteness and what that might mean.

At the truck, the men looked up as I put down the tray. The two white men began to laugh. Not pleasant laughter – there was an undertone of something offended, resentful, antagonistic, even, in the way they looked at me and at the mugs. They mocked, spoke half-angrily to one another. They did not touch the mugs – "Kaffer-goed". I could not look at them; nor could I look at the silent black men as they drank. I fled. I can still feel the way in which my childhood self burned with shame, humiliation and guilt.

No big drama, then. Only an ordinary, invisible moment. There are other, later memories that would have made a more interesting, dramatic narrative, which would have allowed me to represent myself in an alluringly heroic role. Mugs and glasses – a prosaic way to be born into a consciousness of whiteness and blackness, and begin to make the connections with other half-mysterious, but thoroughly normalized practices in my world. As an adult, looking back, I wonder about the mugs and glasses – at my tiny rebellion – the refusal to create a map of difference on the tea tray. Big and small questions: I wonder about the choice of tin mugs – why did I not choose the glasses, instead? The rebellion was a compromise, too. How do such tiny, incremental moments and decisions shape what one becomes? In my case, perhaps this marked the beginning of many other (often misguided; often doomed) little rebellions and transgressions against the things that divide us. Was the apartheid born in kitchen cupboards, in safe domestic spaces, in safe white suburbs, as important as the 'grand Apartheid' of the history books? The tin mugs were thrown out or lost long ago. A pity, perhaps – they are so trendy, now.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Professors Garth Stevens and Norman Duncan for permission to include this piece here.

<sup>2</sup> In his presentation at the University of Milan in 1972, Lacan suggests a fifth discourse which breaks with the strict order of the initial four discourses. As this is intended as an introduction, we will restrict ourselves to the four discourses.