

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

August 2013 Vol. 4 Issue IV

**Editor-in-Chief**

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

**Managing Editor**

Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## Lacan's Metonymic Displacement and its Relevance to Post-Structuralism

**Bornali Nath Dowerah**  
Guest Lecturer,  
Dept. of English,  
DHSK College, Dibrugarh.

### Abstract

The concept of metonymic displacement is not new which Jacques Lacan has introduced in his essay "Insistence of Letter in the Unconscious" (Lacan 1966). It has originated much before when Saussure asserted the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations in language. A similar line of thought is analyzed in Freud and Jakobson as well. This paper aims to find out the significance of the concept and its relevance to understanding poststructuralism. It has been found that these concepts put forward by Saussure, Freud, Jakobson, Lacan and Derridian Deconstruction are interrelated and end in no fixed locus. Rather the concepts keep moving from its originality. So, it is difficult to trace an end or final point. It is metonymic displacement and so it has to move on and on through different thinkers and theories.

**Keywords: Metonymy, Displacement, Signifier, Signified, Play.**

“cogito ergo sum’, ubi cogito, ibi sum” (I think, therefore I am, where I think, there I am) (E`crits 165)

The above statement is the synopsis of Jacques Lacan's (1901-1981) argument in his essay 'INSISTENCE OF LETTER IN THE UNCONSCIOUS'(pub. 1966). Metonymy is the process of drawing contiguity between two things and 'displacement' originated with Sigmund Freud. In German terms it means a 'shift', a 'move' or "veering off of meaning" (Lacan 74). In order to understand the concept of metonymic displacement a retrospection of the school of Structuralism and Poststructuralism may be made.

Tracing back to Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, he asserted the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations in language. The former is a process of selection and the latter is a process of combination of words. For instance, 'I go to school' is a construction where 'I' can be replaced by 'We', 'They', and 'You'. Similarly, 'go' and 'to school' can also be replaced by some other suitable words. This is a paradigmatic instance. On the other case, after selecting suitable words they must be grammatically combined and put to order for the formation of a correct construction, that is, I + go+ to+ school. This is a syntagmatic instance. Now this notion was restricted to language by Saussure. Then in the same arena of language Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) suggests in his essay "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956) that language consists a bipolar structure, oscillating between the poles of metaphor and metonymy. He urges that this dichotomy is prevalent in "all verbal behaviour" and

“human behaviour in general” (Habib 25). He meant that the development of any discourse takes place along two different semantic lines. In the metaphoric line, one topic leads to another through similarity or substitution and in metonymic line, one topic suggests another via contiguity (closeness in space, time, or psychological association).

According to Lacan, these two axes of language—substitution and displacement—correspond to the working of the unconscious. Metonymy, which carries language along its syntagmatic axis, corresponds to the **displacement** of desire that characterizes the dream work in Freud. In 1957, Jacques Lacan, inspired by the article by linguist Roman Jakobson, argued that the unconscious has the same structure of a language, and that condensation and displacement are equivalent to the poetic functions of metaphor and metonymy. ‘Displacement’ operates in the mind unconsciously and involves emotions, ideas, or wishes being transferred from their original object to a more acceptable substitute. In Freudian psychology, displacement works as an unconscious defense mechanism. Lacan looks to Freud’s ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ (pub. 1899) for the roots of his theory that the unconscious is structured like a language. Lacan follows Roman Jakobson in the latter’s major article of 1956, in positing two directly opposed axes of language: the metaphoric axis, which involves the substitution of one term for another, and the metonymic axis, which involves the combination of linguistic terms. Jakobson argued that metaphor and metonymy, or selection and combination, are the two basic axes of language and communication. Metaphor is a paradigmatic dimension (vertical, based on selection, substitution and similarity) and metonymy a syntagmatic dimension (horizontal, based on combination, contexture and contiguity) ( Jakobson & Halle 1956, 90-96). Many theorists have adopted and adapted Jakobson’s framework, such as Le`vi- Strauss (Le`vi- Strauss 1974). Jakobson related the tropes to Freud’s dreamwork processes, regarding Freud’s ‘condensation’ as synecdochic and his ‘displacement’ as metonymic (Jakobson & Halle 1956, 95). Jacques Lacan linked metaphor with *condensation* and metonymy with *displacement* (Lacan 1977, 160). Lacan expresses the signification that occurs in both metaphor and metonymy with two mathematical equations. The equation that describes metonymy is written:

$$f(S\dots S^{\sim})S \sim S(-)s$$

with  $f$   $S$  referring to the signifying function, and  $S, S^{\sim}$  in brackets referring to the connection between signifier and signifier, present in metonymy. On the right hand side of the equation, there is the signifier, ‘ $S$ ’ and the signified, ‘ $s$ ’. The bar in brackets represents the ‘resistance of signification that is constituted’ (Lacan 181). The formula as a whole articulates the fact that the signifying function of the connection of one signifier with another is congruent with the maintenance of the bar. According to Lacan, in metonymy, not crossing the bar implies no new signified is produced. In metaphor however, Lacan expresses this with the formula:

$$f(S^{\sim}/S)S \sim S (+)s$$

Here  $S/S$  represents the substitution of one signifier for another that is evident in metaphor. This equation expresses the fact that the signifying function of the substitution of one signifier with another (metaphor) is congruent with the crossing of the bar between the signifier and signified. Thus, it is only through metaphor that Lacan believes that a new signified can be created.

The purpose of these formulations is to underscore the inherent resistance to signification in language, and point out that this resistance can only be overcome through metaphor, where one signified is injected into another, producing a new signified. Lacan cites an example of metonymy: when “thirty sails” is used to refer to “ship”; in other words, when the part is taken for the whole (É Crits 156). Metonymy, then, is a connection between signifiers, between words, and not between signifiers and signifieds. Metaphor and metonymy are used by Lacan in a number of different contexts. He links metonymy to displacement and metaphor to condensation in the dream process. Language, so long considered the supreme system of communication; a system which in its complexity proves the superiority of humans over other animals, is now seen as disguising and resisting articulation. The signifying chain allows the subject ‘to use it in order to signify something quite other than what it says...it is no less than the function of indicating the place of this subject in the search for the true’ (Lacan 172).

As Lacan's use of the concept "the letter" requires a concept of materiality different from anything previously found in linguistics, he argues that the signifier and signified are separated by a bar: the signifier over the signified, over corresponding to the bar separating the two stages'. The signifiers can slide over the top of this bar, with the signified elements beneath. This means that there is never an easy correlation between signifier and signified and as a result, all language and communication is actually produced by the failure to fully communicate. The asymmetrical relationship between signifier and signified is further complicated by the fact that the bar between them cannot itself be signified: the  $S$  and the  $s$  of the Saussurian algorithm are not on the same level, and man only deludes (or deceives) himself when he believes his true place is at their axis.

Lacan analyses the entire process of metaphor and metonymy from psychological point of view and re-defines the signifier-signified in the light of human psychology. By letter, Lacan designates that material support which concrete speech borrows from language. Lacan's entire study of unconscious is based on the verbal signs. Lacan denies arbitrariness of sign, having a constant signified that is well celebrated by Saussure. According to Lacan, there is no constant meaning of a sign, and one signifier leads to another signifier. Lacan, in his investigation, revises the Freudian concept of unconscious and Saussure's theory of signifier and signified. Lacan seems to insist on the metonymic process in his projection and exposition of unconscious.

Veering towards the school of Poststructuralism, Derrida's deconstruction says that ‘meaning’ depends upon ‘absence’ rather than presence. In this regard he coined the term ‘différance’ which alludes to both the notions of Saussure's ‘meaning’ being differential and that signs also defer the presence of what they signify through endless substitutions of signifiers. Every signified is also a signifier: there is no escape from the sign system. Without a signifier there would not be a signified. So, the signifier is integral to the signified, and the signifier indicates that a signified is at hand, though deferred. Lacan borrows some ideas of linguistics that Freud did not have access to. As we have seen, Saussure showed that a sign is not necessarily

something that connects a word or name to a thing, but is in fact something which connects a sound or image to a concept. The sound or image is called a signifier. The concept is called a signified. Lacan says 'meaning' is produced not only by the relationship between the signifier and the signified but also, crucially, by the position of the signifiers in relation to other signifiers. Metonymy follows the horizontal line of signifiers, which never cross the bar (of repression) that leads to the signified and to signification. Just as desire is always deferred from one object to the next, so the signifier suspends signification while following the horizontal chain. Each signifier that fails to cross the bar has exactly the same meaning. It signifies lack (desire). Thus, in the construction of metonymic displacement Lacan's indebtedness goes to Saussure, Jakobson and Freud.

Lacan in his essay draws an instance of the identification of wash-rooms labelled "Ladies" and "Gentlemen" by a brother and sister. This may be relevant in case of metonymic displacement as both the children identify the "twin doors" in their respective terms in a different way. For an adult, "Ladies" and "Gentlemen" would signify well-dressed people. But if s/he comes across the "twin doors", automatically s/he shall understand that these signify washrooms and not what was earlier meant. Again, for the children the names on the doors meant their respective territories that disclose their unconscious through their arguments. According to Lacan, "if the formula  $S/s$  with its line is appropriate, access from one to the other cannot in any case have a meaning" (Lacan 68). This is a poststructuralist idea which reminds Derrida's notion of "différance" which says that one cannot arrive at a meaning and Lacan adds nothing new. That is why Lacan calls metonymic displacement as the "zones of reciprocal infringement" that keeps on forming "rings of a necklace" which serves as a ring of yet another necklace (Lacan 68). Through Lacanian theory (Lacan 1998 [1949]: 179), the metonymic displacement of nouns in the speech acts of brain-injured patients gained the status of the infinite deferral of the real in the universal formation of subjectivity. Using Jakobson's concept of metonymic deferral, Lacan postulated that a fundamental division in individual consciousness occurs when the subject first encounters his self-image in a mirror and perceives it, rather than his actual body, as the object of desire. This stage marks the beginning of the infant's emergence from the Imaginary realm, wherein consciousness is inseparable from the maternal body and his entry into the Phallic or Symbolic Order, wherein ego boundaries and linguistic competence are cultivated Oedipally in the name of the Father. Following the loss of symbiotic unity with the corporeal mother, the child's identity is constituted by the desire for its irretrievable mother (a kind of paradise lost), which is forever postponed by the metonymic displacement (mirror-like reflections) of the Phallic domain. Lacan's liberal application of Jakobsonian theory is evident here. Whereas Jakobson notes that "in normal verbal behaviour both processes are continually operative" (Habib 110) and treats the extremes of metonymy in terms of a cognitive disturbance, marked by either mute gestures toward the real or temporary displacements of identity, Lacan (1966: 126) poses the similarity disorder alone as the essential means through which the unity of signification and the self "prove . . . never to be resolved into a pure indication of the real" (Lacan 126). Subjectivity is thus formed through a never-ending series of metonymic deferrals (misidentification) as opposed to metaphoric coherence (identification).

In Poststructuralism, Derrida speaks about defer or postponement alongwith differ. Lacan uses this concept in the explanation of the three stages in a child's life. Often a child's desire for the mother which is hindered by the father is metonymically deferred in some other personality



whether it is the father itself, a relative or a friend. Lacan's metonymic displacement may be said as the juxtaposition of Freudian and Jakobsonian notions of displacement and metonymy respectively. Lacan's difference lies in scientifically stated hypothesis that the unconscious is structured like language. He takes the help of mathematics and physics, considered as pure science, to establish his philosophy. Nevertheless, the language he uses to prove his point does not seem convincing and clear as he is said to have intentionally played with his readers. He seems to give more emphasis on speech over writing. As speech loses its importance and evidence instantly, Lacan's approach seems to invite more and more critiquing. Lacan and Derrida resemble in their mode of writing which is playful, elliptical and sometimes obscure. Both have built their works upon Saussurean notions and signification but the former turned towards the discourse of psychoanalysis and the latter towards deconstruction. Lacan's realm of unconscious may be somewhat similar to Derrida's notion of absence as both concepts are based on the connection between signifiers to signifiers and this perhaps finds its roots in Saussurean structural linguistics. Poststructuralism interrogates the validity of truth and Lacan's position seems unconvincing as he tries to hypothetize his statement. On the other hand, like the structuralists give significance to structures, Lacan too identifies structurality in the realm of the human unconscious. Thus, Lacan stands in such a position which Derrida would have termed as non-locus. For instance, Harold Bloom in his work 'The Anxiety of Influence' (pub. 1973) has to say that a younger poet is always influenced by his predecessors. At least some traits are followed if not all. This process of influence is a never ending one just like Roland Barthes' 'From Work to Text' (pub. 1967). A work becomes a text only to become a work in turn and again a text, just like a signifier becomes a signified only to become a signifier for another signified. This unconscious process of signifier to signifier has captured the universe. This is nothing but a metonymic displacement. And Lacan left no stones unturned to prove this fact. How far he sounds convincing is difficult to pertain. Using the tool of arithmetic he is trying to nullify his own hypothesis.

### Works Cited:

- Murphy, Paula. "The Linguistic Dit- Mension of Subjectivity". Minerva, Vol.8 2004. Web. 07 April 2012. <<http://www.minerva.mic.ul.ie/vol8/dit-mension.html>>
- "Lacan and Language". Web. 11 April 2012. <<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/lacan.htm>>
- Chandler, Daniel. "Semiotics for Beginners". Web. 17 April 2012. <<http://users.aber.ac.uk/dgc/Documents/S4B/sem07.html>>
- "Film Communication Media: Critical concepts". Web. 11 April 2012. <<http://www.adamranson.plus.com/critical%20concepts.htm>>
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. US: OUP, 1997. Print
- Culler, Jonathan. *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP, 2002. Print
- Jakobson, Roman & Morris Halle. *Fundamentals of Language*. The Hague: Mouton, 1956. Print
- Lacan, Jacques. *E`crits: A Selection. Trans. Alan Sheridan*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print
- Nayar, Pramod K.. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd..Second Edition, 2011. Print
- Habib, M. A. R. *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory : A History*. USA: Blackwell Publishing. First Edition, 2008. Print
- Ed. Sturrock, John. *Structuralism and Since: From Levi-Strauss*. Oxford: OUP, 1979. Print