

# Heidegger and Lacan: Language Beyond Communication

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## Abstract

Lacanian psychoanalysis cannot disregard its debts to philosophy, especially continental philosophy. Lacan's conception of language is derived from multiple philosophical sources (i.e., Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard) including Heidegger's philosophy of language and pride of place. Heidegger's view of language prepares the ground for reversing the relationship between language and human beings, overcoming common sense about language and the communicative model of language. Language is much more than a set of labels; it shapes the human world and structures social relations themselves. In addition, language acts as a social link. The function of language as a social link allows us to think of it in relation to the Law and the very function of this human subjectivity. In reference to the Other of the Law and language, the subject finds her recognition, and this implies that the language is not reducible to communication. The process of technical-scientific domination of Western institutions leads to a reduction of their functions to the formal aspects, which may lead to a reification of the human as well as a state of alienation.

## Introduction

According to Heidegger (1959), philosophical reflection on language cannot fail to start from an initial and fundamental methodological distance from the different disciplines (from linguistics to psychology) that deal with language. While these disciplines tend to define language as a system of signs useful in conveying some meanings (the most widespread conception), philosophy deals with language itself. While recognizing the value of these disciplines, philosophical reflection must be able to ignore them—that is, it must be able to place brackets around the datum of common sense according to which one speaks to say something and transmit a message (Heidegger, 1959). The conception of language as communication considers it on a level of exteriority,<sup>2</sup> with respect to which philosophical reflection must therefore abstract, and considers words merely as labels of 'real' things.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Greek word that corresponds to our "language" is *ἑλῶσσα*, "tongue". Language is *φωνή σημαίντική*, a vocalization which signifies something. This correct but externally contrived representation of language, as "expression", remains definitive from now on. It is still so today. Language is taken to be expression and vice versa. Every kind of expression is represented as a kind of language. [...] Once, however, in the beginning of Western thinking, the essence of language flashed in the light of Being—once, when Heraclitus thought the *Λογος* *Language and Psychoanalysis*, 2020, 9 (2), 4-12. 4  
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In the Heideggerian philosophical perspective, language itself carries an intrinsic ontological connotation. Speaking, in fact, is not merely the expression of a message between two speaking beings but founds the very being of the things of which it speaks: The word is already a thing in and of itself (Heidegger, 1959). In this perspective, as something more than a mere tool endowed to human beings to share experiences, language (Λογος) is linked to the act of laying (λέγειν) (Heidegger, 1954). Language is linked to the presentation of things in a “gathering laying-before”, and for this reason, it can be understood through a precise type of listening: Listening to the silence of language means going beyond the simple mechanical beating of sound on the eardrum.<sup>3</sup> Language, as Λογος, requires a listening that differs from hearing of everyday life:

“Not to me”, i.e., not to this one who is talking; you are not to heed the vocalization of his talk. You never hear properly so long as your ears hang upon the sound and flow of a human voice in order to snatch up for yourselves a manner of speaking. Heraclitus begins the saying with a rejection of hearing as nothing but the passion of the ears. But this rejection is founded on a reference to proper hearing (Heidegger, 1954, p. 67).

It is in this orientation of hearing how to listen that we can take in language as the reference to the things themselves and not as meanings or messages in which the represented is already provided in a prefiguration offered in common sense. There is something more in such a hearing: Language speaks and, as Λογος, places the being of things in themselves, “the being of the essent”. Therefore, what would make a difference in the philosophical conception of language is its listening point, whence it follows that it is not so much man who speaks as the language (Heidegger, 1959).

### ***Language and Speaking Being***

Distinguishing between the conception of language as a speaker and as an instrument of communication is a fundamental operation that became a cardinal principle in the psychoanalytic theorization of Lacan (Di Ciaccia & Recalcati, 2000, p. 45; Richardson, 2003, p. 17; Meyer, 2007), which was translated into French ‘*Logos*’ by Heidegger (Heidegger, 2013). Moreover, in *Being and Time* the ordinary use of

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as his guiding word, so as to think in this word the Being of beings” (Heidegger, 1954, pp. 77–78).

<sup>3</sup> Some authors have noticed a possible comparison between Heideggerian’s listening of being and Freudian psychoanalytic listening in the patient’s discourse. In this perspective, Lacan’s ‘return to Freud’, placing language as a fundamental element, would account for the Heideggerian perspective on language (that is, a non-connotative model): through the *talking cure*, patient language becomes central to achieving truth (Richardson, 2003, pp. 19–20). A word is considered the signifier in itself regardless of the intentional meaning it carries.

language typical of everyday life was subjected to strong philosophical criticism and referred to as *idle talk*, a form of being inauthentic in one's own way of being in the world (Heidegger, 1953, pp. 156-159). From these philosophical coordinates, the psychoanalytic understanding of language assumes a different value than the purely psychological one. It is conceived not as a simple instrument of mediation between individuals but rather as a fabric that organizes and structures social relations (Gurgel, 2009). Language, in particular, mediates the relation between an individual and her subjective experience of the internal (emotions, sensations) and external (material things) world; it may shape experiences themselves (Cimatti, 2016a). This perspective is radically opposed to the empiricist conception of language, according to which there is an isomorphism between mind and reality, a mirroring relationship between subjective experience and external reality, in which language would only be a set of labels indicating the things of the world (Cimatti 2016b)<sup>4</sup>. In this sense, Lacan describes the relationship of the human being with language in terms of 'field'— that is, as a place within which the speaking being is inscribed before her biological birth (which is therefore subsequent to her symbolic birth). These reflections may lead psychoanalysts to say that the unconscious—what inhabits the human in the most in-depth and rooted way—is structured like a language<sup>5</sup>.

It is clear that, in both the Heideggerian philosophical perspective and in the Lacanian psychoanalytic one, language goes far beyond the pure and simple communication between individuals,<sup>6</sup> as subjects exchange, in full consciousness and awareness, messages and meanings, almost as if they were goods.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, we can observe

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<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it seems appropriate to indicate that this also implies a criticism of those epistemological positions coincident with the logical positivism, which were overcome in the current epistemological debate (Franco, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> This conception of language as a field of relational structuring that precedes the birth of the subject herself allows it, at the symbolic level, to be exemplified by what Lacan has stated about the ignorance of criminal law: "No one is supposed to be ignorant of the law; this formulation, provided by the humor in our Code of Laws, nevertheless expresses the truth in which our experience is grounded, and which our experience confirms. No man is actually ignorant of it, because the law of man has been the law of language since the first words of recognition presided over the first gifts [...]" (Lacan, 1966a, p. 225). See again Gurgel (2009, pp. 167–168).

<sup>6</sup> "This conscious subject, master, makes the difference between linguistics and psychoanalysis. Their epistemological domains are distinct. Linguists and psychoanalysts listen to some words, but in a different way. The first try to describe languages, to build a scientific theory of their operation. Their concern is objectivity, the general, thus following the Aristotelian path. Thus, they pursue "every" subjectivity, while psychoanalysts claim it in associative listening and that their objective consists not in a theory of language but of the unconscious» (Houdebine, 2005, pp. 987–988, *our translation from French*).

<sup>7</sup> "[... ] it is, on the other hand, more important to recall that this ideology of the conscious subject constituted the implicit philosophy of classical political economy and that Marx was criticizing its "economic" version in rejecting any idea of "homo economicus", in which man is defined as the conscious subject of *Language and Psychoanalysis*, 2020, 9 (2), 4-12.

how Heidegger's perspective on language, wanting to overcome the perspective of a language as a means of communication and naming world objects, is proposed above all as a metaphysical perspective that wants to be an alternative to the model that is at the foundation of the liberal political vision (Woodson, 2020), a critical political perspective which is also consistent with Heidegger's political choices (Nelson, 2017). In our perspective, man is instead spoken by language and is traumatised, even in the body, by the signifier. In psychoanalysis, this relationship is often described with the pun *motérialité* (Lecoeur, 2016), as a synthesis of word and matter, to indicate the material effect that words have on the subject and on her body (the word is already a thing).

The extent to which man is marked by language is evident from the early stages of childhood development. From birth, man is thrown into a state of biological incompleteness and instinctual deficiency that makes one extremely dependent on one's environment. This obliges the *infans* to build tools to express one's own needs and address them to the Other on which one totally depends (Romano, 1989). In such a state of dependence, the wail, the cry, and the scream become primordial forms of invocation until the word is set up as a representation of something that is missing (symbol), as a question addressed to the Other concerning one's appetite, which, however, was already being under-communicated. The question so mediated by the word is satiated not by the object that it could receive as an answer but by the very gesture of the answer by the Other (that is, the signifier). Thus, language, from the beginning, possesses a person in her needs, from which she is always decentralized: Her questions do not ask for specific satisfaction in an object but convey a desire, which in turn is satisfied with its dissatisfaction, with that emptiness which corresponds to the very desire that is the Other's desire: "this subjectification consists simply in posing the mother as this primordial being who may be there or not. In the child's own desire this being is essential. What does the subject desire? It's not simply a matter of appetite for the mother's care, contact or even her presence, but of appetite for her desire" (Lacan, 1957-58, pp. 165–166). Thus, the fundamental dependence that requires care becomes, in the symbolic mediation of language, a request for recognition (Cimino, 2019). In this sense, language is much more than communication for man. It is the very figure of one's desire that is of one being subject and, therefore, of one being in the world.

Starting from this structure of the relationship between subject and language, it is noted that the latter acts as an operator of interpersonal relationships, ensuring third parties' role, mediation, and a symbolic guarantee of the relationship. The effect of the structuring of social relations takes on a specific consistency in the Law's institution as an organization of the subjectivity in relation to the social structure: "It is not the Law itself that bars the subject's access to jouissance—it simply makes a barred subject out of an almost natural barrier. For it is pleasure that sets limits to jouissance, pleasure as what binds incoherent life together, until another prohibition—this one being unchallengeable—arises from the regulation that Freud discovered as the primary process and relevant law of pleasure" (Lacan, 1966b, p. 696). Thus, in a language recognized as something more than communication, even the Law takes on further meaning with respect to the simple regulation of relationships between

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his needs and that subject of need is defined as the ultimate and constitutive element of every society" (Althusser, 1996, p. 115).

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individuals, administration of the sovereign will of a narcissistic subject.<sup>8</sup> The Law is a symbolic place in which the subject finds an orientation in her life, thus organizing her action and desire within the horizon of the Third (the Other of Law and Language):

The uppercase Third is the reference provided as a logical third to which every relationship of legality responds within the culture and the very idea of society. It indicates the horizon of law. The point from which it is possible to conceive of that law as a system of rules merely reflects the function of a third party [...] (Legendre, 1989b, p. 57, our translation).

### **Language and Society**

In this perspective, if the language is the structure that centres the human in the social relationship, making her arise as a subject in front of the Law, then the legal institutions of law are the “objectification” of social relationships (Honneth, 2014 p. 124). In the function of *reférence* (that is, reference of the symbolic authority to another: “in-name-of”), the law formally establishes the function of the third party, guaranteeing the subject’s recognition as the holder of rights and desires. According to Legendre (1989a), in this social organization, the subject is born within the social world, and this allows her to request self-recognition as a desiring, speaking being. However, this organization is increasingly in crisis in contemporary society because the law has been reduced to a mere administrative instrument, which has eroded its genealogical status (that is, its symbolic foundation in the form of “in-name-of”). The technical-scientific vision of the Law reduces the organization of the symbolic structure to mere technical functionality, useful for regulating only individual relationships within a context of trade emptied of the horizon of meaning (Romano, 2002): “It is true that the rise of scientific rationality led to the preclusion (‘foreclosure’) of another form of reason, one that preceded today’s form yet – especially in view of legal practice – has therefore not disappeared” (Michels, 2013). It is a process of degradation of the Law from the guarantor of the recognition to the mere functional administration of the relations of autonomous market subjects, which already leads to a pre-philosophical (pre-Heideggerian) vision of language as a mere communication tool and message vehicle. Therefore, we could say that the reduction of the Law to its strictly functional (technical-administrative) aspects, typical of bureaucracy, refers to a use of the typical language of everyday life—that is, of that inauthentic being which, as stated above, Heidegger called *idle talk*. It is not by

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<sup>8</sup> See, in this regard, the distinction made by Lacan between the symbolic relationship regulated by the Law and the imaginary function that is held on the narcissistic structure: “We must distinguish, therefore, between the principle of sacrifice, which is symbolic, and the imaginary function which is devoted to it, but which veils the principle at the same time that it gives it its instrument. The imaginary function is the one Freud formulated as governing object cathexis as narcissistic” (Lacan, 1966b, p. 696).

chance, with regard to the function of the Law, that Heidegger distinguished the law of natural sciences from normative law: “A law of nature is a principle of explanation, a norm is a principle of evaluation [*Beurteilung*]” (Heidegger, 1987, p. 28). In this sense, the reduction of the principle of reason immanent in the Law to technical rationality implies the exclusion of the poietic function (‘creative’ by a constructionist view) of the Law itself. This process, in our opinion, coincides with the adoption of a certain type of language understood as mere communication—that is, only as its technical aspects.

Thus, the Law, in its degradation from a symbolic order to an abstract operation, comes with degradation to the social level of the language itself. In the dimension of the global market, social life increasingly tends to be administered according to an economic model, in which the widespread language is increasingly of a technical and evaluative nature (Romano, 2002). The technical knowledge that permeates and turned into a desert the symbolic universe, changes the language from evocative (with its reference to a sense horizon) to numerical, thus reducing itself to a vehicle of administrative and accounting provisions. From this perspective, it can be pointed out that the legal institutions of Western democratic societies are marked by the risk of producing a form of extraneousness among citizens, precisely through a disconnect between social relations and juridical regulation, which resembles an abstract formality and incomprehensibility that can lead to social pathologies of freedom (Honneth, 2014, pp. 86–88). From a psychoanalytic point of view, this process can be interpreted as being due to a lack of possibility of subjecting the signifiers conveyed by the institutions: The language is not an expression of the social bond but is lived as a stranger to the life of the subject with alienation effects (Alparone, 2019). The number replaces the letter, so the language no longer organizes the subjective recognition but becomes a mere digit that communicates itself. In other words, it is a language and a law that is self-founded and self-justified in its functionality and not as a genealogy of the symbolic authority (using a Legendrian term) (Avitabile, 2004).

In the loss of the symbolic recognition value of language, we could consider the contemporary Western society as a “communication society”<sup>9</sup>—that is, a society in which language is reduced to an advertising vehicle, an instrument to communicate and execute commercial transactions, a numerical digit to indicate the price of a product, the balance to be paid (Romano, 2002). In this world, the individual rediscovers her absolute *private* freedom, also *de-prived* of the field of recognition that would ensure its effective realization (Honneth, 2014). The desire of the individual, left free from the constraints that social and symbolic constraints operate, is not fulfilled in a claim of normative character but precipitates in the condition of appetite, of a need satisfied by the object of consumption (Romano, 2002). In the society of communication, we must deal with free individuals without authentic autonomy (Perniola, 2004). They are merely reduced to ‘Ego’, atomic subjects devoid of symbolic mediations. For this reason, psychoanalysis’ task also assumes a different connotation compared to what it may have assumed previously: It “does not consist in

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<sup>9</sup> In this regard, see Luhmann’s text on Mass Media (1996) that reads the Western social reality as based on the communication process, which affects production not only of the reality (through the news) but also of the individuality of the spectator (pp. 71–75).

adapting people to the social and communicative *status quo*, but rather in re-establishing their relationship with the symbolic order” (Perniola, 2004, p. 52).

In the symbolic degradation of language, the communication society, as a society of economically oriented exchanges, achieves the maximum technical potential, the same that Heidegger (1954) highlighted as a ‘threat’ to man: It diverts one from recollection and prevents one from listening, in the silence of language, to the being of things.

## Conclusion

Psychoanalysis employs a conception of language quite different from that typical of common sense or psychology. Both Heidegger and Lacanian psychoanalysis disregard the linguistic model as a set of functional labels to indicate ‘things’. Language conceived of only as communication is a reduction from a psychoanalytic point of view, which also considers it something that provides shape to the world, something that shapes social relations and structures them. In this sense, Lacan takes up the Heideggerian conception that it is not the man who speaks but language. Lacan further radicalized this thesis by saying that man is spoken by language. Therefore, language is not a device, a function in the service of the speaking being, but it precedes and surpasses them. Man is shaped by language, and the world assumes infinite possibilities of meanings in language to the point that we could say the world is built linguistically.

What Heidegger noted regarding language as something related to being is also found in works by Lacan and has a fundamental role in the clinic. Through the word, the analyzing can give shape to the suffering that inhabits the symptom, he can put, in words, the symptomatic *jouissance* that freezes the existence of the subject in the circle of repetition. Therefore, through the talking cure, it is possible to touch that real, that being, in Heideggerian terms, which is at the heart of subjective suffering, thus opening the subject to new possibilities that break the logic of the repetition of the ghost.

Falling back into the logic of language as communication has radical effects. One of the most evident is undoubtedly in the institutional context, in which the function of the Law is no longer the expression of a common feeling, of the social bond, and authority appears to the subject in all its abstract arbitrariness. The effect of a technical-bureaucratic language, which therefore does not refer to a logic of reference and does not convey any recognition of the subject, is to make the individual perceive a sort of separation and estrangement from the institution, which no longer represents her because it does not convey any recognition of rights-desires. This is what has been observed in our Western societies increasingly marked by populism—that is, by large masses that no longer recognize themselves in the political power and the established laws. In the decay of language from the authentic expression of the social bond and the symbolic order to a technical-communicative function, a deterioration of the Law is also produced. Indeed, if in the first model of language the principle of *ignorantia legis non excusat* applies from the time when the Law was the very expression of the social bond, in language-communication, the institution is recognised as alien and the Law is potentially lived as persecutory (Alparone, 2018). In this way the contemporary function of the Law is reduced to the Super Ego (Marret, 2012).

In this sense, it seems essential to rediscover the philosophical roots of the Lacanian psychoanalytic conception of language. Heidegger is one of the teachers from whom we can draw fundamental lessons for thinking about our psychoanalytic experiences, both clinical and social.

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