

LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLISM

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I stated at the beginning that I had no well integrated presentation of the whole field, but rather several parcels, "chunks of knowledge." These are the main parts:

- 1) Freud's contributions -- some as early as 1900. (You received copies of several of the important quotes.)
- 2) The contributions of S. Langer, E. Cassirer, L. A. White, Whorf, et al. Most of them are fairly recent, quote Freud but in my opinion are quite unaware of his central contribution.
- 3) Certain aspects of child development, relations, dependencies, and pre-stages which I infer from psychoanalytic child development.

Different authors employ a different terminology and concepts which overlap but are not identical. (One specific difficulty: the English translation uses the terms "word representation" and "word idea" as synonyms. It also uses: verbal image, linguistic symbol, verbal representation.) As this is a summary of several relevant theoretical points discussed in any one of the three seminars, I will give first the definitions of the basic concepts in the field at which we arrived. We defined:

pre- or proto-symbol = as characteristic for the pre-stage of symbolic representation. Primary narcissism is exuberant and flows over to things, substances, functions resembling (sometimes quite vaguely) body-parts, -products, -functions which are confused with them. (see Ferenczi)

psychoanalytic symbol = affective symbol. Something that carries an affect which originally belonged to and was appropriate for something else. The original relation has been impaired by repression. (Ferenczi, Jones)

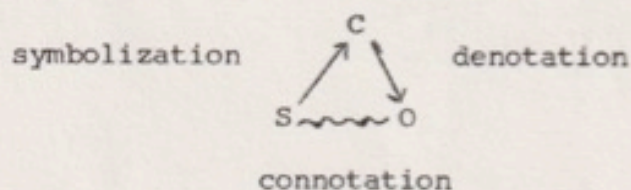
sign = a quid pro quo. A sign is related to the signified by either being part of it, resembling it, or having been in repeated temporal or spatial contiguity with it. ("Partial identity" E. Cassirer). A sign may be artificial (conventional) e.g. the relationship is man-made, or it may be natural, e.g. it exists without our specific interference. Man and higher animals act upon signs a great deal. Basically a sign tells us how to act now or soon, what to expect now or soon. (Pavlov's bell is a sign.)

a symbol (in everyday and in philosophical sense) = refers primarily to a generality, an affect or a concept, a class and only indirectly, i.e. through this concept does it refer

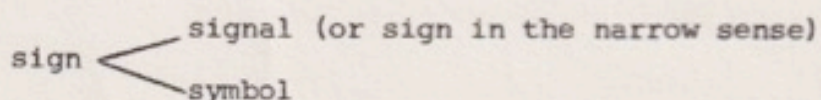
to a specific thing, a specific instance. While a sign is above all related to action, motor action, a symbol relates to a mental act. A symbol brings something to our mind. A sensory resemblance between symbol and symbolized is not necessary. This may seem a deficiency but is a tremendous asset: Something that has no sensory qualities (a relation, a function) can yet be expressed by a symbol.

Our mental processes are either on the primary level (steered by affects) or on the secondary level (guided also by cognitive signposts). Perhaps we can say that secondary processes imply the ability to use concepts. Freud at first considered the use of language indispensable for them, but later (Outline, 4th Ch.) changed his view: There could be secondary processes without language; however, the use of language was a sure indication that a mental process was pre-conscious. We amplified this to: In order to use secondary process a person must possess language. (Here we discussed the functioning of schizophrenic children and Dr. Ruttenberg contrasted their difficulties of expressing themselves with the ease with which the average person "translates" a dream into language.) Waelder's view that memory is by and large predicated upon the possession of language was discussed. Finally we stated that both primary as well as secondary processes are distant from the mental processes of animals as both employ symbols, the primary process mostly symbols in the psychoanalytic sense.

The functions of connotation and denotation are not easy to grasp and so I suggested a scheme in spite of my not being quite sure of its correctness. Designate the three points of a triangle as Symbol, Concept, Object. Then the three sides represent the functions of: symbolization, connotation, denotation.



S. Langer more recently changed her terminology and now suggests sign for the broader concept, and signal for what has been here defined as sign.



The use of symbols is restricted to humans. From the psychoanalytic viewpoint we add: Perhaps man is able to use (understand and invent) symbols (and through their interposition concepts) because as an infant he lived as much or more in the world of protosymbols and affective symbols than in the world of sober, tangible, physical reality. The human infant is incomparably more sheltered than any other primate child, he does not have to evaluate his physical environment and its dangers in a sober, realistic way. This is not offered as an explanation of man's ability to use symbols, but as a pointer that in man both the specific nature of his libido and his cognitive development are but the two sides of one coin. (Specific nature of his libido = exuberant early narcissism evoked by maternal care, caresses and play; the strong attachment to mother.)

The distinction between symbol and sign is difficult to grasp because everyday language frequently confuses the two. Moreover, the same entity can actually be both a sign and a symbol. For instance, according to the context a certain word can be either a symbol or a sign.

Language exists on two levels: as sign language and as symbolic language (representational, discursive, conceptualized language). Academic psychology sees communication as the main function of language. This position makes it impossible to understand the tremendous gulf between sign and symbolic language. Animals, living in groups, communicate effectively through sign language. So do very young children and persons with certain brain injuries. (Kurt Goldstein). All of us communicate a great deal through verbal and other signs. Freud refers to the fact that our unconscious may communicate with that of another person without words; without that this communication reaches our awareness. ("The Unconscious"). If communication were the central function of language, then the gulf between our language and infrahuman language disappears. Our language becomes merely a richer and more complex edition of animal language.

Communication is a very important function of language, but the main asset of language is that it makes possible a different range of mental processes. The richness, complexity and precision of our mental acts is predicated upon language; so are the concepts of time, space, causality. Because language changes our inner world, it also changes the content of what can be - and actually is - communicated. In the foregoing and also in the later paragraphs "language" refers to symbolic language.

Freud, while not differentiating between sign and symbolic language, stresses a function which obviously belongs to symbolic language only; namely the new kind of self observation it makes possible. He speaks of "a second (inner) surface of awareness that is created by language. Language makes possible a far more intense, varied, precise interaction of the individual with his own acts.

We discussed specific points formulated by Freud in successive studies. The following paragraphs should be read in conjunction with the mimeographed quotes you received:

In the 7th Ch. of "Interpretation of Dreams" (1900) he refers to "Consciousness" as a sensory organ which registers sensory data from the periphery, i.e. from the outer world and data of pleasure and displeasure from the inside of the body. Our mental functions as such can originally not reach consciousness because they do not have any psychic qualities. "Later" however, mental functions become linked with word ideas and thus can attain awareness. (Here and in other places I translate "Bewusstsein" with awareness. Reasons for this were discussed.)

In "2 Principles ..." (1911) he differentiates between fluid and bound energy. Thinking is characterized as a kind of trial or test-acting employing small quantities of psychic energy.

In "The Unconscious" (1915) he deals extensively with the peculiarities of schizophrenic language. He tries to pinpoint the characteristic of consciousness (awareness). The idea of an object can be dissected into word idea and thing idea (Hypercathexis). Then, together with the reader, he considers - and rejects - various possibilities that could account for the difference between a conscious (pre-conscious) and an unconscious idea: "the two are not different records of the same content situated in different parts of the mind" nor are they "different functional states of cathexis in the same part." Finally he points to the real difference: "the conscious idea comprises the concrete idea plus the corresponding verbal idea" while "the unconscious idea is that of the thing along."

In "Ego and Id" (1923) he again speaks about word representations which are added to, or linked with the memory image and thus enable it to become pre-conscious, but already on the next page he changes the focus of his discourse: relations form one of the most important parts of our thought processes and relations can become comprehensible through words only.

The quotations from these studies which you received are more extensive than the above. Here I have quoted from each study only one or two specific points to show the various steps taken by Freud towards a theory of the function of language. Now let us return to each study and rephrase or modify and enlarge each step.

1900: Freud speaks of two kinds of data which our mind registers and then refers to a third added new dimension. I would like to put it this way: Our mental apparatus may be compared to a slot-machine which responds to three kinds of coins (or if this seems

too crude and too one-sided a simile, then think of an apparatus for which three ranges exist.) (Freud: Qualitaetsreihen) They are: The Lust/Unlust series, the sensory qualities, the concepts (symbols, abstractions). The last "dimension" is specific for and restricted to human beings.

1911: The simile of fluid and bound energy helps us to understand mental processes that accept delay, partial completion, detours. A fluid runs off instantly, but energy that is "bound" can be stored and discharged later, or in installments. Re-definition of thinking (i.e. secondary psychic processes). Perhaps we can define it as a test-action which essentially uses symbols or concepts.

1915: Freud again stresses that processes (functions) inside the apparatus which yield neither Lust nor Unlust and are thus not directly given to our awareness, can become perceivable; i.e. pre-conscious through the association with word representations. What Freud develops about the schizophrenic's specific attitude to language is most helpful and the clinical implications were discussed in the seminar, but the statement that thing representation plus word representation yields object representation is not easy to understand. (The difference between thing and object is not stated and "object" here does obviously not mean libidinal object.) In my opinion a word representation is not something that is "added" or "linked" (verknuepft) -- I prefer to say that the word representation transforms the mental act. Actually we do not know what enables us to make abstractions, to conceptualize and symbolize -- but the word representations make it possible to "grasp", to "manipulate" concepts and thus gives reality (existence) to them.

1923: Once more Freud refers to the addition of word representations (derived from the memory of acoustic perceptions) which makes pre-conscious a representation which would otherwise be unconscious. However, it is his subsequent discussion of relations which is of crucial importance.

For our thinking relations are of more relevance than are the images of concrete things. Relations between the images of things have no visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc. qualities which could represent them, but by becoming "linked with" the memory images of words (heard or seen) relations do attain sensory quality. (This simile of Freud reminds us of the way a thyroid metastasis becomes perceptible with the Geiger counter by becoming linked with a substance that is perceptible to the Geiger counter. The addition of the radioactive substance does not change the process we are studying.)

Word representations or, as we today prefer to say, symbolic language, is indispensable for the creation of a conceptually organized universe, i.e. for the universe in which humans live. An abstraction, a concept, is always based on relations and may

be considered the result of relations. A concept implies relations between things which as a rule are not all present at a given moment. Thus we summarize: It is through language that our thought processes are transformed. It is through language that we can become aware of (observe) our mental acts, and this awareness changes their essential character.

Stated in a nutshell: Animals of the lower phylae seem almost unaware of the effects of their acts upon the environment. (We say "instinct is blind.") When in an experiment you change the expectable environment, an insect will nevertheless carry out the sequence of instinctual acts although under the new conditions they are completely useless. In contrast, higher animals are able to "learn by experience"; that is they observe the effects of their actions and they modify them, and man is able to "observe" not only the effects of his motor acts, but he moreover observes his mental acts and can modify them before they have any effects in the outer world. Language enables him to think.

We thus see the existence of three levels: animals with almost no awareness of the effects of their acts; animals with extensive awareness of their motor acts but almost no awareness of their mental acts before these have become translated into action; man with extensive awareness (consciousness) of his purely mental acts. Hence a.o. the ability to plan far ahead, to be aware of his own affects. He can spin long chains of mental acts not intended to effect immediate changes in the environment. Language changes the essential function of the mental apparatus.

Conceptualization changes the world we live in, it creates the world of human beings. Any impulse (drive, affect) is experienced differently and can be controlled more effectively. A.F. has expressed this forcefully "...in psychoanalytic metapsychology the association of affects and instinctual processes with ideas of words is stated to be the first and most important step in the direction of mastery of instinct which has to be taken as the individual develops ... the attempt to lay hold on the instinctual processes by connecting them with ideas which can be dealt with in consciousness, is one of the most general, earliest and most necessary acquisitions of the human ego ... one of its indispensable components."

It is true: complex (multiphasic) mental processes (functions) can be carried out, particulars can be related to one another without symbols designating them, but only with the help of language can I observe myself in these activities. It is through language that I can "step out of my skin" and see myself as others see me and can see others in the way I see myself.

In my opinion, this distance-creating capacity of language helps us in the control of our drives.

These are the propositions with which we were primarily concerned:

The acquisition of language changes all our mental acts, those that are prevailingly guided by cognitive data as well as those which are dominated by affects.

For the ability to acquire language -- and through this to enter the human world -- certain experiences and developments must have taken place during the pre-language phase of ontogenesis. Human existence without language is unthinkable. Language is man's indispensable tool. Without it the human ability to organize the world conceptually cannot be activated. Psychoanalysis stresses and studies man's interactions with himself while earlier psychologies concentrated on man's interaction with his physical environment.

In recent years the importance ascribed to symbols and to symbolic (conceptual, discursive) language in our life has greatly increased. (L.A. White: "All human behavior consists of, or is dependent upon the use of symbols.") However, this importance is already implicit in Freud's early writings. Because his comments are scattered in his writings and are cast in a terminology that is at variance with today's terms -- it is difficult to piece them together. Yet this task is highly rewarding as we gain a deeper and broader understanding of the function of language than we can obtain from any other writer. Many of the findings of recent authors can be seen as independent, and hence most valuable, confirmations of Freud's findings in this area. You will find many more passages in his writings which refer to language directly or by implication. You also find Nunberg's "Synthetic Function of the Ego" on the reading list -- each facet of this function being predicated upon the possession of language.

All the above is for your use only as it is based upon the discussions in the seminar and is not definitive. I would be glad to have specific comments from you and I would be glad also to get some of my books back!