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From the “nombrification¹” of the world to the changes in the subject's relationship with language and the other

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The symptomatic changes we have encountered in clinical practice in recent decades cannot fail to be of interest to the clinician. These have emerged in parallel with a certain social context, the particularities of which raise questions about their effects on the process of subjectivation. The proliferation of the diagnoses of autism – which is characterised by an avoidance of the relationship with the Other, understood by Lacan as the Other of language – but also of addictive practices in subjects from any clinical structure, or of so-called borderline personality disorder, to give but a few examples, points to this contemporary tendency to avoid the relationship with the Other mediated by language and castration. This specific feature of a tendency to avoid castration is contemporary with a certain Western social context – which is spreading with globalisation – marked by the rise of a quantification of the world, which finds its paroxysm in capitalist logic, and which is massively supported by technical and technological advances. So how does this current “empire of numbers” – to borrow an expression from Olivier Rey (2016, p.7), a French mathematician, novelist, essayist and philosopher – contribute to the avoidance of a relationship between the subject and the Other, a necessary condition for the process of subjectivation? This question sets us on a journey that goes from the genealogy of the quantification of the world to its digitisation and the impact on the symbolic, and more specifically on the changes in languages and their consequences for contemporary subjects. Such societal changes, by affecting the very structure of our languages – the embodied medium of the subject's relationship

¹ A term coined by Olivier Rey (2016) to describe the increasing quantification of many aspects of our daily experience.

to language via speaking² – and by establishing a binary logic in the interplay of exchanges, eliminate the third party that underpins all enunciation and all social bonds.

From the nombrification of the world as a contemporary Babelian myth...

The role played by numbers in today's society is of interest to us for two reasons. Firstly, it reveals some of the coordinates of our *épistémè* (in the sense that Michel Foucault (2002) gave to the term³), and thus the mentality of our time, understood as "the set of habitual ways of thinking and believing and the psychological and moral dispositions characteristic of a collectivity and common to each of its members" (Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, 2024) [our translation]. Jacques Lacan (1978/1991, p.30) maintains that "the collective and the individual are strictly the same thing". This intertwining of the subject and the social is what legitimises our questioning of the motives and issues at stake in the rise of numbers and quantification in most of our contemporary societies, as far as the subjective dimension is concerned. For if humanity is bound up in language, we can question the effects of the increasingly common use of a symbolic system specific to the domain of numbers rather than signifiers. In particular, it is interesting to note that, according to Rey (2016, p.13), contrary to popular belief, statistics is not a discipline that originated in mathematics and was subsequently applied to the political, economic and social fields. On the contrary, it has its origins in the latter – with spectacular growth from 1820 onwards – and only became a mathematical discipline much later, towards the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, the fact that it has its roots in the field of social sciences points to a certain signifying aim of this discipline, absent from any mathematical

² As Marc Thiberge puts it, a language is "the set of codes that constitute the social institution of language through the speaking subject". As such, "we inhabit a language before we practice it". (Thiberge, 2012, p. 70) [our translation].

³ We understand it here in the Foucauldian sense: "*Épistémè* is not what can be known at a given time, given technical inadequacies, mental habits, or the limits set by tradition; it is what, in the positivity of discursive practices, makes possible the existence of epistemological figures and sciences" (Foucault, 2002) [our translation].

logic: in fact, mathematics does not aim at meaning, unlike the human sciences. It is therefore not insignificant that this expansion of quantification is, according to the historian Alfred W. Crosby (cited by Rey, 2016, p.12), part of "a universalist mentality", i.e. a desire to create a language – based on numbers – that could offer a universal translation of the real. In other words, from the outset, like the Babelian myth, the pre-eminence of numbers has supported the fantasy of a universal language, the aim of which would be to avoid the misunderstandings inherent in communication. So it is the inherent flaw in the human condition - that of being a being of language, with all the rest this necessarily implies, the misunderstanding that all discourse carries - that we have to overcome. But where myths and great narratives have failed to fill the essential gap in the dimension of language, the system of numbers may well succeed.

... to the elimination of the subject of the enunciation

Whereas myth is based on a structure that implies a relationship between signifiers – it concerns a text – the realm of numbers escapes any possible signifying articulation in the sense that the latter would lead to meaning. Indeed, according to Rey (2016, p.8), the use of numbers is not primarily aimed at address, but rather consists in "quantifying more and more aspects of our experience of the real." Since quantifying does not imply any relation whatsoever to any other, there is thus no remainder inherent in the act of enunciation. So, if the realm of numbers is now in the process of replacing that of signifiers, what consequences might this have for the Other – structured as a language, we recall, according to Lacan? Could this contemporary substitution of language undermine the very structure of the Other, of language, and of the unconscious?

Let us start by recalling the distinction between *langage*, *langue* and *parole* in the wake of Saussurean contributions. The philosopher Olivier Gaignard summarises this as follows:

Langage [language] is the human ability to produce signs, or more generally symbols, and to communicate with others. It should be noted that this faculty is not limited to producing articulated sounds. We produce many signs that are not words.

Langue [a language, a tongue] is both a social product of the faculty of language and a set of necessary conventions, adopted by society to enable individuals to exercise this faculty [...].

Parole [speech] is defined by the father of modern linguistics as the individual appropriation of the common code that constitutes a language.

(Gaignard, 2022) [our translation].

These definitions highlight the difficulties we may encounter with a language of numbers. Indeed, while language is the human ability to produce signs and symbols, it is not clear that numbers – which are indeed symbols – can be used to communicate with others. This consideration is far from insignificant at a time when artificial intelligence, which logically follows from this “nombrification” of the world, is playing such a role in our daily lives. It begs the question: how can a subject recognise an Other behind a system not of signifiers, but of signs, such as a computer? What recognition is possible from the subject's speech? It is probably no coincidence that in March 2023 a man committed suicide after submitting himself to an artificial intelligence called “Eliza”, according to the French newspaper *Libération* (Duval, 2023). This young Belgian researcher, who was suffering from severe eco-anxiety, took his own life after six weeks of exchanges with this chatbot using ChatGPT technology and in relation to their content⁴. The failure to recognise and address a subject's suffering: could this be one of the factors precipitating the subject's death? It is as if the suffering at the heart of his enunciation, in other words, his subjectivity, had not found an acknowledgement of receipt on the part of the machine-Other. And for good reason, the recognition of the Other is through

⁴ At least, that is what the thirty-year-old's last exchanges with Eliza suggest, and this is confirmed both by his psychiatrist and his wife, who is quoted as saying in the same article: “Without these conversations with the Eliza chatbot, my husband would still be here” [our translation].

enunciation. However, enunciation cannot be reduced to the transmission of a message; it implies a subject, the subject of the unconscious, which is constituted in an act of speech. Not every utterance in itself implies a subject of the enunciation. Enunciation rests on the subjective cut and the rest of this operation. But it seems that this is precisely what is being undermined today by the changes in languages and their use, beyond the mathematical system, supported by the myth of a universal language, caught up in a trend towards globalisation.

Changes in languages: the structure of our "contemporary dead languages"

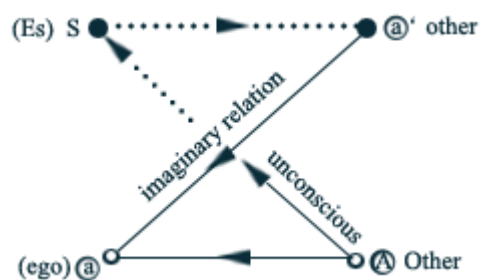
So how can we fail to notice the changes in the languages that are now replacing those we used in the past, and which seem to be following in the footsteps of this race to the universal, to the detriment of the singularity of the subject? We cannot help but be struck by the fact that these changes affect precisely the structure of a language (*langue*), and particularly the pivotal point at which this is linked to both the faculty of language (*langage*) and speech (*parole*) in such a way as to support the subject of the enunciation, the subject of the unconscious. This is borne out in the changes driven by the scientific and technological advances that are perpetuating the nombrification of the world, in particular through the language of computers, which gives the primary form to the contemporary newspeak that is invading our societies today: a language from which the subject is excluded from the outset, and which we propose to call a 'contemporary dead language' in the sense that it is a language that is no longer spoken, which therefore, according to the linguist Claude Hagège (2000, p.67), no longer has a 'speaker' and thus cannot, in fact, be used by a subject of the enunciation. We thought it appropriate to take up this expression, adapting it slightly, in order to make it clear that speech is not enough to render a language 'alive', and that certain conditions inherent in the language and how it is spoken are necessary for a subject to be attached to it. Everything happens today as if we were dealing less and less with the speech of the other in favour of a pseudo-speech, something that closely resembles it but is not identical to it, something "as if". This echoes the same syntagm proposed by one

of Freud's students, the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch, who in 1934 described *as-if* personalities as people whose "relationships are devoid of any trace of warmth, [...] all expressions of emotion are formal, [...] any inner experience is totally excluded. This resembles the performance of an actor who is technically well-trained but lacks the necessary spark to make their interpretations true to life [...]. Identification with what others think and feel is the expression of this passive plasticity, and the individual is capable of the greatest fidelity and the most vile perfidy". (Quoted in Bruno, 2005, p. 80) [our translation]. Psychoanalyst Pierre Bruno points out that these *as if* individuals attach themselves with great ease to social groups, thereby seeking to give content and reality to their inner emptiness (Bruno, 2005, p. 80.). He also notes, with regard to clinical practice, the extent to which the traits of "technically well-trained actor" and "automaton" resonate with the fairly well-known phenomenology of autism (Bruno, 2005, p. 80.). While the *as if* gives voice, it does not seem any more subjectivised than the disembodied voice of the machine-Other that resonates more and more in our daily lives. The striking example of the synthesised voice that announces underground stations – mentioned by the French psychoanalyst, essayist and columnist Yann Diener (2022) in his book *LQI: Notre Langue Quotidienne Informatisée* – could be an edifying illustration of the current trend in the relationship between the subject and language: a relationship between a machine and a binary language that only allows a substitute for speech without a subject.

It is the case that this binary language, this sequence of 0s and 1s, of signs, plays an enormous role in the area of exchanges today. All communication tools involve passing through the binary code, which breaks down the statement into a digital reality (Diener, 2022, p.34). Today's clinical practice shows us that this is not without consequences. Whether this concerns e-mails written or SMS⁵ messages sent, the technological medium not only imposes a recoding of every statement, i.e. a translation into a binary sign language – mathematical, computer language, a sequence of 0s and 1s – which is handled by artificial intelligence, but moreover it

⁵ SMS is the abbreviation for "Short Message System".

colours the style of exchanges to the point of reworking spelling, grammar and punctuation. When a subject uses emoticons, for example, they are using signs rather than signifiers. Similarly, it is notable that in exchanges via screens, punctuation disappears: commas and full stops that separate become suspect, even aggressive, such that an analysand once mentioned that she had been troubled by the fact that a colleague had concluded his message with a full stop. This seemed cold to her, a sign of hostility. This is not an isolated case in France: for many young people, the use of a punctuation mark is open to interpretation, usually negative: the other person is probably angry with them, and we are not far from the persecutory experience typical of paranoid logic. The equivocation, here condensed into a full stop, and the break are insupportable. The full stop that indicates the limit of the statement disappears in favour of the beginning of a sentence that never concludes, or rather, of a sentence that, when spoken, could be one, but when written only looks like one. The use of the sign attacks the relationship between the subject and the other, attacks the Other, which is reduced to the imaginary register. The misunderstanding, inherent in the structure of the exchange as soon as there is enunciation, is set aside, immediately interpreted according to a paranoid logic, supported by a strict binarity. The inclination towards a relationship between the subject and the other on the imaginary axis, as illustrated by Jacques Lacan's Schema L (1981/1997), according to a logic that excludes the third party, seems to be increasingly the order of the day.



Schema L is used to represent the structure of subjectivity, which is organised along two axes: an imaginary axis that runs from the ego (*a*) to the other (*a'*) – already at work at this logical time of subjectivation when the infant, in the mirror, alienates itself from its image in a specular transitivity and which will

constitute the support for all subsequent imaginary identifications –, and the symbolic axis that runs from the Other (A) to the subject (marked S, in homophonic echo of the Freudian *Es*), the axis which runs from the locus of the code – from which the unconscious messages originate – to the subject, who in an act of addressed speech may find it possible to pierce the imaginary axis to make heard something from the unconscious which, in essence, fails to express itself completely – it is one of the effects of language that it carries a remainder – and which is thus represented on the schema by the dotted part of the axis. It is therefore with regard to the laws of language, to what is implied by the locus of the symbol, the locus of the Other, that the subject is constituted. Any address therefore presupposes such a quadripartite structure.

Yet our contemporary dead languages, by excluding the third party and imposing a binary language, seem to succeed in reducing the Other to a place of code that is itself binary – even though it is not so for the human being in essence – in such a way that the symbolic axis folds on the imaginary axis, in a logic restricted to a mirror relationship.

The risk of the disappearance of any possibility of subjectivation?

Finally, if the increasing extent of recourse to binary language and technology favours the rejection of the subject of the enunciation in exchanges that are predominantly conducted in written form today – in institutions, the substitution of software for transmission times is a typical example –, this seems to cover all the spheres of languages, both written and spoken. On the one hand, we have written messages in which the subject dwindles to nothing, and on the other, subjects who speak without committing themselves subjectively. It is as if the contemporary subject's relationship with the other has been altered by this forced use of a binary language. While the language system initially carries thirdness and libido by its very essence, by creating a binary language, mankind seems to have succeeded in reducing the interplay of exchanges to a structure other than the one given to it by language from the outset. The extreme of such changes, for the time being fictitious,

found its fulfilment in the trivialised implementation of Elon Musk's project with the Neuralink implant, created by his company. While on 9 April 2021, as the French neurosurgeon Philippe Menei (2021, p.87) reports, we could already see "a macaque monkey playing the Pong video game by thought, thanks to a brain-machine interface developed by Neuralink" [our translation], on Monday 30 January 2024 we learned that the start-up Neuralink had fitted its first cerebral implant on a patient the preceding Sunday (*Le Monde*, 2024). This means that human beings can now be directly - in the truest sense of the word - connected to a machine. In such a situation, Diener highlights the short-circuit that this creates between desire and demand: a simple thought has immediate effects in reality – a reality that in this case no longer has the same status as the one the subject constructed for himself before the emergence of the computer age, since this new reality is also, in part, virtual, or at the very least, passes through a virtual reality. The boundary between reality and virtual reality therefore finds itself blurred. The Other of the address is eliminated, and the subject is no longer divided by language. So what is the relationship to the Other when every speaker is permanently connected to a binary thought-processing system via an implant, which could itself end up being created and perfected by the artificial intelligences of tomorrow? This is not to say that the laws of language would no longer exist, but could human beings still know anything about them? Quite apart from any judgement, the point is to assess the effects of this hegemony of the sign promoted, among others, by capitalist and scientific logic, and which, beyond any fantastical science-fiction hypothesis, can already be heard in a multitude of demands in our social field which, relying on a linguistic structure of newspeak, can only fail to place emphasis to the subject in favour of a dead language, fertile ground for contemporary radicalism.

Consequences for psychoanalytic practice

So how do we orient ourselves with these subjects who disorientate us, who have no faith in the Other, in the effects of speech, even though these support all psychoanalytically oriented work? If access to the unconscious is denied by a

certain contemporary logic of the relationship to the Other, to castration, what is the clinician's place and function in the transference? How can we work with these subjects who make no demands? How can we make the real resonate in the symbolic? Is this what clinical work should aim to achieve? Although the analyst does not have to want anything for the other, and does not have to seek to 'neuroticise' them, it is nevertheless difficult to remain deaf to what certain contemporary subjects bring into play in the follow-up. Indeed, in recent decades, we have encountered more and more subjects whose structure is difficult to identify. Neither neurotic nor psychotic, these patients are sometimes labelled "borderline", which raises questions about the clinician's position in the transference. While silence and even scansion support the follow-up of a neurotic subject, they seem, on the contrary, to undermine a transference relationship that is struggling to become established in this particular case. And with good reason, the delegitimisation of the Other does not allow a transfer to be established on the symbolic axis – between the Subject and the Other – as represented in Schema L. So is the contemporary subject condemned to remain on the imaginary a-a' axis?

One way of thinking about this would be to consider that the establishment of a transference on the imaginary axis could be a first stage in the analytical work, without being an end in itself. Louis Sciara supports such an idea, proposing to go through the mirror relationship for those subjects he describes as "modern-day neurotics [...] who no longer really own the weight of their words" (2016, p. 286) [our translation]. The considerations he raises concerning clinical practice are worth noting here:

The clinician must know how to position themselves as an *alter ego*, at least at the beginning of the transference, while taking care to maintain Otherness in its rightful place. [...] This is a way of establishing with them the conditions necessary for transference to take place in the disparity of a relationship with a subject who is supposed to know. In favourable cases, this can lead to the emergence of their symptom, hitherto buried, but

previously there, which confirms the neurotic nature of their structure" (Sciara, 2016, p. 286) [our translation].

But this raises the question: how can a neurotic symptom arise from a transferential relationship on the imaginary axis? We propose to consider the hypothesis that such a shift might be facilitated by an unprecedented position on the part of the clinician, who would have to transmit something of their own desire, of the real that causes this desire, in such a relationship. This echoes Lacan's notion of the Real Father as "the agent of castration" (Lacan, 2002). Thus, far from remaining silent, the analyst would be called upon to make their enunciation, to uphold the place of the small other in which they find themselves, but not to be fooled by it, and to operate a kind of cut on this imaginary axis by means of their enunciation, in short, to embody the Real Father. This is what Lacan himself suggests in *Seminar XVII*: "Why? In a psychoanalysis, might it not be – one suspects this from time to time – the psychoanalyst who is the Real Father?" (Lacan, 2002). Contemporary clinical practice thus invites us to pursue a full reflection on the function of the Real Father in transference.

Conclusion: the topicality of the death of the other, of the subject... and of psychoanalysis?

This shift from speech to calculation, to the digital sphere, which excludes the third party, has far-reaching consequences. On the part of the subject, it undermines the process of subjectivation – the proliferation, in recent years, of the diagnosis of autism is undoubtedly a prime example of this. Indeed, as the psychosociologists Julie Dachez, André N'Dobo and Oscar Navarro Carrascal note: "The prevalence of autism is constantly increasing. It has risen from 1/2000 births in 1960, to 1/150 today [...]. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) even reports a prevalence of 1/50 births" (Dachez et al, 2016) [our translation]. It also questions the position of the clinician today: how, without compromising ethics, can we position ourselves in the transference with these

contemporary subjects who bear witness to an unprecedented relationship with the Other?

In social terms, we can be concerned about the meteoric rise of radicalism, which reflects the impossibility of dialectising the relationship with the other which only finds its resolution in the real death of the other, according to a paranoid logic.

So how can the psychoanalyst, who is guided by the laws of speech and language, remain deaf to the effects of the changes at work in the social bond? How can the ethics of psychoanalysis be maintained in the face of these changes, which affect the very structure of the language with which the clinician works? These are the questions we must continue to work on if we do not want our discipline to allow itself to be dragged into this contemporary logic to the point of a radical rejection of what it would nevertheless have to make heard in the field of the subject, but also of the social.

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