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Lauren A. Rutter
Bucknell University

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Transference and the Ego: A (Psycho)Analysis of Interpsychic Translation

*Lauren A. Rutter
Bucknell University*

Translation is a necessary part of ordinary psychological development. A successful translation brings with it “unpleasure” because the *Kultur* in which we live is a veneer of things we know and have to suppress in order to mitigate the demands of the id (*das Es*). Repression (*die verdrangung*) is motivated by our desire not to feel unpleasure through translation. According to Freud, manifestations of the id (*das Es*) are translated through the ego (*das Ich*). The ego acts as the translator of drives (*der Trieb*) into acceptable actions. Through the process of psychoanalysis, the analyst assumes the role of the translator (ego).

Freud believed that spoken language is not important to analysis of the unconscious. Spoken language has limits that do not compare to the feelings or effects of the drives within us. In nominalism, the thing is what the name is. Reality is bound by the name you ascribe to that reality. Therefore, the world is defined by the limits of language and given names. A notion of German Romanticism is the possibility of infinite potentiation of language. Language lacking limits has a magical quality that links two worlds. There is a double consciousness between the two worlds of thought/drive and the linguistic expression of the thought/drive.

One defines the other and they are interlocked. When drives are translated into words by the ego and then expressed, this double consciousness produces a double figuration. There is a translation process from drive into language within the self, and then another translation from language of the self into an outward expression to the analyst.

The process of transference (*die Übertragung*) is suggested by Freud to be a false connection. The client experiences thoughts, feelings, and memories derived from previous events and relationships and projects these onto the analyst. In this process, through the translation of thoughts into expression to the analyst, the client redirects feelings towards the analyst himself/herself. The connection is false because instead of fixing the actual problem, the problem is transferred to the analyst. The patient believes that through expression, he/she is being finally understood. The client may develop erotic feelings for the therapist; these feelings may actually form a barrier and interfere with the analyst helping the client.

Freud believed that the desire for cathexis (*die Besetzung*) drives us. Cathexis is the libido's charge of energy. This psychic energy is attached to a person, object, or body. The release of this charge of energy creates a feeling of pleasure, whereas, a successful translation brings with it "unpleasure." Repression and transference are defense mechanisms used to cope with the unconscious unpleasure.

Freud believed in three kinds of translations: intrasystemic, intersystemic, and interpsychic. An intrasystemic translation occurs writing a system of one language where there is a transfer of one to another. An intersystemic translation is between languages or somatic systems. For example, a hysteric performs an intersystemic translation from body (ailments) to language (complaints). The type of translation most applicable to transference (*die Übertragung*) is interpsychic. This translation focuses on the shift from object to object. Counter-transference is also an interpsychic translation.

According to Freud, all of the following are translations: dreams, hysterical, obsessive and phobic symptomatologies, parapraxes, fetishes, choice of means of suicide, and the analyst's interpretations. To focus on the last example, the analyst's own

interpretations are a translation of the client's expressed emotions and behaviors. If the analyst is translating the already translated double figuration, he/she becomes a third variable that deduces the original drive (*das Trieb*). The analyst becomes the ego, but is only human and thus imperfect. A translator can make mistakes, and drives can be translated inaccurately. The ego cannot make mistakes unless it is pressured by the id to act in a malevolent way. The translator can easily make a mistake in evaluating a patient if he/she is not careful.

In analyzing the patient, it is pivotal to be accurate in order to provide an appropriate treatment plan. If the analyst makes mistakes in translation, he/she is putting the patient at risk. One way in which the analyst could make an error is by becoming too involved in the patient's own testimonies and narratives and thus transfer his/her own repressed feelings to the patient. This is a phenomenon known as counter-transference. Counter-transference may lead to a skewed translation of drives.

Whereas Freud emphasizes transference and counter-transference as projective identification techniques through an intersubjective translation, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan revises Freud in viewing the self as constituted by its relationship to an other, with the primary developmental stage beginning with the experience of viewing oneself in a mirror. Lacan's mirror stage is the first moment in which the subject recognizes the self in a mirrored reflection. A transformation takes place when the subject assumes identification in an image. This transformation becomes an intersubjective translation.

Lacan described his ideas as "Return to Freud" because he translated the ideas of Freud into a structural-linguistic terminology that removed agency and subjectivity in their interpretation. Though Lacan believed his philosophy was "Return to Freud" in nature, many of his ideas differed significantly from Freud's. For instance, Freud believed that the unconscious and linguistic conscious were two separate entities, very segregated and only joined through the ego's translation. Lacan, on the other hand, believed that the unconscious was as complicated as the conscious and therefore also structured linguistically. "For Lacan, Freud's central insight was not...that the unconscious exists, but that it has structure, that this structure affects in innumerable ways

what we say and do, and that in thus betraying itself it becomes accessible to analysis."¹

Julia Kristeva departs from Lacanian ideology and argues that Lacan's bracketing of the drives (*Trieb*) "castrates" Freud's discovery. In Kelly Oliver's "Kristeva's Imaginary Father and the Crisis of the Paternal Function," she writes, "Kristeva, protecting the Father of psychoanalysis from this castration threat by his most prodigal son, reinscribes the drives in language. Her tactic is to reinscribe language in the body, arguing that the dynamics that operate the Symbolic are already working within the material of the body and the presymbolic imaginary."² It was Kristeva's goal to trace the signifier through the body in order to reinscribe the body in language at the same time.

For herself, Kristeva sets up the difficult task of connecting the body and language, and she chose to do so by recovering a repressed maternal body and the abject maternal body. The connection of language to body is an intersubjective translation because it translates one object through another object. This case uses language and bodies as the two objects. In addition to the maternal body, Kristeva uses the notion of the imaginary father to connect body and language. The imaginary father is defined by Oliver as a screen for the mother's love, associated, as it is, with the child's relationship to its conception and the mother's womb. "The imaginary father provides the support necessary to allow the child to move into the Symbolic. This is a move from the mother's body to the mother's desire through the mother's love... The semiotic body is abjected if necessary, but only for the sake of what motivates the bond in the first place: maternal love."³ Maternal love is a translator from body to desire, and therefore an intersubjective translation. In order to understand this translation, it is necessary to understand the notion of the semiotic body of Kristeva and mirror stage of Lacan.

¹ Malcolm Bowie, "Jacques Lacan," *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida*, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 118

² Kelly Oliver, "Kristeva's Imaginary Father and the Crisis in the Paternal Function," *Diacritics*, Vol. 21, No. 2/3, A Feminist Miscellany (Summer/Autumn, 1991), 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

Kristeva believes that semiotic activity is the work of drives that stem from a semiotic body.⁴ She studies the drives that emerge prior to the mirror stage. Kristeva searches to describe the way in which the infant body becomes the body proper. Oliver writes, “She (Kristeva) complains that for Lacan the subject is constituted at the expense of “the real,” the drives, from which the subject will forever be cut off.”⁵ Kristeva wants to move away from the notion of symbolic drives and focus on the real. For Lacan, drives are symbolic. The analyst must assume the role of the ego and translate the symbolic drives expressed by a client.

Kristeva is concerned with Lacan’s concept of the drive (*Trieb*) because if the drive is already a symbol, the process of signification becomes lost and the move between the semiotic and the symbolic is “replaced with nothingness.” The lack brings out the unitary being of the subject, and the subject’s being is founded on this lack. Therefore, the drives are lost. “The subject of desire lives at the expense of his drives, ever in search of the lacking object.”⁶ At this point, it is the role of the analyst to step in and interpret the drive so that the drive is not searching futilely for a missing object. If the translator cannot assist, there is the threat of no transference and therefore no intersubjective translation. The one being translated is stuck in a confused state and is unable to replace one object with another. However, there is also the optimistic notion of the subject translating his/her own drives without the assistance of a therapist who could skew the translation if transference, counter-transference, or a simply a misinterpretation of drives occurs. There is the idea of bringing back the semiotic body to define the self without a third-party translator. The ego itself can translate.

“For Kristeva, within Lacanian theory the living body is sacrificed to desire. It becomes only a sign.”⁷ Kristeva argues that when language is not mixed with drives, the drives become repressed. Since the drives are repressed, one must enter into the

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1980), 136.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984), 131.

⁶ Oliver, “Kristeva’s Imaginary Father,” 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

symbolic realm and transcend the self to discover them. Drives/desires/emotions experienced in the symbolic realm are not real, and when one enters this realm for too long or cannot escape, he/she must search for a translator to help them come back to the real world. This translator is the analyst/therapist. However, losing the ability to distinguish between the real world and imaginary or symbolic, is becoming psychotic. In Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she writes, "...the exemplary subject of Lacanian desire is the masochistic neurotic engaging in autocastration and bodily mutilation or the completely catatonic body of the clinical schizophrenic."⁸ Translation of drives is a necessary part of psychological development and must be done to remove the self from the symbolic realm and understand the real.

Kristeva has several specific concerns with Lacan's mirror stage. They are:

Lacan's account of the mirror stage emphasizes the body as other, the body as symbol reflected in the "mirror." It throws us into a hall of mirrors where we can no longer identify the "real" of the body; the real body is impossible...Lacan's account covers over the fact that without the body there would be no reflection in the mirror.⁹

Here, Kristeva struggles to explain what motivates the transition from the presymbolic to the symbolic. Oliver writes that "Lacan, of course, posits the castration threat as the motive. But in order to experience this threat in the first place, the child must take the position as a subject in the mirror stage."¹⁰ The child must realize that simultaneously he/she is and is not his/her image. The image is a symbol, but it is also real. To see what is real, a translation must occur between the body and the image of the body, the other. Kristeva argues that the mirror stage requires a negation of the other to identify the subject as self.

A translation is impossible when one cannot distinguish between subject and other. If there is no transference between

⁸ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 132

⁹ Oliver, "Kristeva's Imaginary Father," 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

object and another there is also no transcendence of the subject. The subject is stuck in a realm without the possibility of self-discovery and needs a translator to explain the symbolic and the real. Herein lies another problem identified by Kristeva with Lacan's theory: the paradox of its cyclical motion. She believes that for Lacan, "...the child takes a position as subject so that he can negate his image in order to take a position as subject."¹¹ Clearly, when the mirror stage is already symbolic, it cannot be used to explain the onset of the Symbolic. Kristeva believes that the only way to explain the change from presymbolic to symbolic is to acknowledge the "material element, which is heterogeneous to the Symbolic." Rejection is not unique to the symbolic, but it operates first in the semiotic body. This is different from Lacan's view that the symbol opens up the world of negativity.

Kristeva uses psychoanalytic principles of Freud to further prove that negativity is "gestural and kinetic – the bodily act of throwing and retrieving the reel."¹² She believes that the Symbolic is founded both in lack and excess because if it were "merely founded on a lack, then there is all the more reason for avoiding it altogether, for taking refuge in neurosis and psychosis."¹³ Since the primary example of material negativity is anality, the notion of the Symbolic founded solely on lack is disrupted. "In anality, rejection precedes the Symbolic."¹⁴ This disproves the Lacanian theory that the move from presymbolic to symbolic is motivated by a castration threat or sense of lack. In the place of lack, Kristeva credits the notion of excess and pleasure that moves the child into the Symbolic realm. The id and libido drives are therefore keys in the discovery of the Symbolic realm. Excess is equally as harmful as lack, and best controlled by the ego. Drives must be translated by the ego to make sense of the self and remain balanced.

Kristeva's feminist psychoanalytic theory places an emphasis on Lacan's notion of returning to dyadic union. Lacan believed that we are unconsciously trying to return to the dyadic union of mother and child, which is lost in the mirror stage. Kristeva explores the maternal function in and before the child's

¹¹ Ibid., 45.

¹² Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 170.

¹³ Oliver, "Kristeva's Imaginary Father," 45.

¹⁴ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 151.

attaining of subjectivity and entrance into the Symbolic realm. “For her, material rejection operates according to a maternal logic, which prefigures the Law of the Father. This law before the Law is the law of the mother’s body which regulates the oral and anal drives.”¹⁵ To explain this notion of law before Law, Kristeva uses the semiotic *chora*, the organizing principle of the maternal body. Kristeva defines the *chora* in a footnote in “Le sujet en proces”:

The *chora* is a womb or a nurse in which elements are without identity and without reason. The *chora* is a place of chaos and which is and which becomes, preliminary to the constitution of the first measurable body...the *chora* plays with the body of the mother – of woman – , but in the signifying process.”¹⁶

In the *chora*, “maternal regulation sets up paternal prohibition.” The mother is the regulator of what goes into and out of her child’s body. She regulates the child’s body in relation to her own. “Kristeva maintains that the first sounds the child makes mimic his mother-child dyadic bodily relationship.”¹⁷ The mother acts as the translator for her child’s drives, filtering out the important and unimportant so that there is no excess or lack.

In order for the child to see itself as a separate entity from his/her mother, an interpsychic translation from object to object is required. The child must see the difference of his/her being from the mother in order to attain more complex drives of his/her own and language. When the child can see himself/herself as separate from the mother, there is the responsibility to translate drives with one’s own ego. This may create a problem for those who are dependent on the translations of their mothers for what is right and wrong. When the child realizes that he/she is not the mother, he/she becomes a new subject and creates new language that mimics the words of the mother. Kristeva argues that, “...it is the incorporation of the patterns of language through speech of the other that enables the infant to communicate and thus commune

¹⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, “Le sujet en proces,” *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), 57.

¹⁷ Oliver, “Kristeva’s Imaginary Father,” 46.

with others.”¹⁸ Since communication is central in psychotherapy, language and imitation translation of the mother’s language in is necessary for transcendence of the self. When the child’s realization in the mirror stage forces a break in the dyadic union, the child’s own ego must become the translator. The mother as translator of drives will no longer suffice because the connection has been severed.

For Kristeva, to become autonomous, a child must break away from identification by abjecting its mother. The child “...must move from an identification with the mother’s nourishing breast to an identification with its own birth and the horrifying maternal sex...”¹⁹ Abjection is defined as “an absence (the normative condition of the pre-mirror-stage *infans*) or a collapse (the condition of the borderline patient) of the boundaries that structure the subject.” Kristeva herself defines abjection as what disturbs identity, system, and order.”²⁰ Kristeva’s writings suggest that the maternal body is an abject threat to the Symbolic. Examples of prohibition against the maternal body are seen though the oedipal prohibition against incest of Freud, against maternal desire (*jouissance*) of Lacan, and/or against the semiotic *chora* of Kristeva.²¹

For Kristeva, the primary drive pleasure threatens the Symbolic, and is therefore repressed. Oliver writes that, “It (the maternal body) threatens to uncover the process that leads to the appearance of unity and thereby expose that unity as merely one moment in the process. The unity of reason or consciousness cannot admit that it is part of a process that alternates between unity and the fragmentation and repetition of drives.”²² The mother and child must sacrifice their connection so that the child can become a subject proper.

While the mother and child are in a dyadic union, the mother negotiates the demands of the child’s drives. The mother, in providing a good model for behavior and language, also acts in

¹⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹ Ibid., 47.

²⁰ Shuli Barzilai, “Borders of Language: Kristeva’s Critique of Lacan,” *PMLA*, Vol. 106, No. 2. (Mar., 1991), 295.

²¹ Oliver, 50.

²² Ibid., 48.

the role of the superego. However, once the mother becomes the abject, she does not correspond to an ego.²³ The abject is excluded from the superego because it threatens the Symbolic and the identity of the newly established and autonomous subject. The child now is forced to create his/her own superego and ego to manage the demands of the drives.

For Lacan, an interpretive act centers on the indirection of language. In Volume 7 of *Comparative Criticism*, Gary Handwerk writes on Lacan's indirection of language and uses a translation to explain the detours taken by the speaking subject in the path to communication, "...That in which one must be interested is in the point of knowing why she wished precisely that the other person understand that, and why she did not say it to him clearly, but by allusion...If you understand, you are wrong..."²⁴ Lacan's analysis of the indirection of language can be used to explain an ironic sense of self-identity which "lies at the heart of ironic self-presentation."²⁵ The child who has just recognized his/her image in a mirror reflection becomes the subject who is dependent on others for status at any point. Handwerk writes, "There is no such entity as a subject, except by and with other subjects. This is a subject whose definition is finally impossible...it is the sum of its interrupted encounters with all its significant others, which serve as moments of entry into death...which alone can definitively identify the subject."²⁶ The subject becomes the other in the mirror stage. For Freud, the risk of reduction of otherness is solved by internalizing the other within the self. The unconscious is an other that is always surrounding the subject. Even in becoming a separate subject from the mother, the unconscious is not accessible. The unconscious cannot be translated. Lacan writes, "That in the subject, which is in the object and is not of the subject, is the unconscious. The unconscious exists in and through speech, but is inaccessible insofar as the signification of that speech can remain concealed, censored by the ego."²⁷ The ego translates

²³ Ibid., 48.

²⁴ Gary J. Handwerk, "Lacan on Psychoanalysis and Literature," *Comparative Criticism* Vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 106.

²⁵ Ibid., 107.

²⁶ Ibid., 107.

²⁷ Ibid., 108.

selectively to protect the self, and filters the drives that are harmful to the body and mind.

Drives are essential to being human. The conscious, unconscious and preconscious are all translated into behaviors and emotions. In dyadic union, the mother is the translator for the child's drives. Her translation is perfect until the child realizes they must be their own being in the mirror-stage of development. In a break from the dyadic union, the child attains subjectivity and agency. At this point, the mother loses the ability to translate the drives of her child and the child's drives are translated by the self. The ego of the child becomes the translator of drives. The ego is a stable and accurate translator, unless defense mechanisms fail and the unconscious drives of the id pervade. If the ego fails to be a translator that molds to fit societal and cultural norms, the subject may decide to go through psychotherapy. At this point, the analyst is the translator. The analyst, however, will never be as effective as the mother or unblemished ego since the translation gets skewed as it is passed from self to language to analyst. The pure translation of the mother is lost in development of the child. Although the loss of the pure translation is unconscious, it creates an "unpleasure" that cannot be rectified. The self is not in a constant state of suffering, however, so long as the ego can compensate for the "unpleasure" through its own interpsychic translation and defense mechanisms such as transference. In psychological development, an interpsychic translation by the ego takes the place of a pure translation of the mother.