

THE LANGUAGE OF HISTORY AND ITS IMMANENT CRITIQUE: FROM LACANIAN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO MARXIST REVOLUTIONARY PRACTICE

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This article reflects on the relationship between Lacanian Discourse Analysis and Marxism, critical psychology, political action, revolutionary practice and the events of history. In addition, it underlines the historical nature of discourse and its analysis, excluding the existence of an analytical ahistorical metalanguage. This exclusion is the starting point for the reincorporation of history into the discursive sphere, an elucidation of how discourse and discourse analysis can deal with historical events, a discussion on how such events can be dominated by comprehension and explanation and a consideration of the possibility of keeping alive the flame of history and revolution through Lacanian Discourse Analysis.

Introduction: The political side of Lacanian Discourse Analysis

The label of Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA) was introduced by Ian Parker (2005) to designate, not 'a fixed method or grid for reading text' (p. 167), but the result of the 'potential contribution of Lacanian theory to the analysis of discourse in psychology' (p. 164). This general definition allows the retroactive application of the LDA label to previous proposals of discourse analysis that have used, in one way or another, the theoretical notions of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in the field of psychology. The first of these, perhaps the first LDA, can be found in the origins of the French school of discourse analysis: the complex Lacanian–Althusserian method developed by Michel Pêcheux (1969, 1975a, 1975b) between the late 1960s and the 1970s. Parallel to Pêcheux and also in France, Marie-Christine d'Unrug (1974) drew on several of Lacan's theoretical notions in a manual outlining a distinctive analysis of the enunciating conditions and the enunciated materials of discourse. Thirty years after these pioneering methods, from 2000 till date, we witness a resurgence and proliferation of LDA that generally adopts Ian Parker's conception of the method, extends beyond the borders of France, and leads to various publications in the field of psychology, including three books (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2006, 2010; Parker & Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014) and several articles (Parker, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2013; Hook, 2003, 2008, 2013; Georgaca, 2005; Ducard, 2007; Branney, 2008; Saville Young & Frosh, 2009; Malone & Roberts, 2010; Neill, 2013; Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014a, 2015a, 2015b; Castro, 2015; Lara Junior & Pinheiro Jardim, 2015).

A striking feature in the many works that have developed or applied LDA is the critical distance from the psychological perspective. In fact, Michel Pêcheux—under the pseudonym 'Thomas Herbert'—and Ian Parker are known not only for their methodological contributions to the

field of discourse analysis but also for their theoretical work of critique of psychology (e.g. Herbert, 1966; Parker, 2007). We understand this when considering the clearly anti-psychological orientation of Lacanian theory, which is perhaps the most incompatible with psychology in the twentieth-century history of psychoanalysis. In the field of psychology, LDA could only be consistent with Lacan as part of a project of critique of psychology.

Another striking feature, a less understandable one, regards the authors who have dealt with LDA. Some of them, including Pêcheux and Parker, are Marxists or are closely associated with Marxism. Their Marxism is sometimes manifested in the way they emphasise the political or ideological by using Lacanian notions in discourse analysis. This seems rather puzzling considering that Lacan was not a Marxist and not even a leftist. However, we attain some clarity when we account for factors such as Lacan's contributions to Pêcheux's Althusserian background (Althusser, 1966), the current influence of a Marxist or post-Marxist Lacanian left (Stavrakakis, 2007), Lacan's hypothetical latent Marxism (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014b) and the affinities between Marxism and psychoanalysis, especially Lacanian psychoanalysis, in their respective hostile and conflicting relationships with psychology (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017).

In addition to frequently channelling a critique of psychology, LDA also offers, perhaps under the influence of Marxism, a historical-political critical account of power and the discursive plot of ideology. This is evident, for example, in analyses such as those of Mitterrand's triumphal slogan in Pêcheux (1983), the interview with a Mexican guerrilla in Pavón-Cuéllar (2006, 2010) and the film *The Negotiator* in Parker (2010). Here, words operate as indicators of economic structures and/or social relations. Critically analysing them requires not a purely logical-formal and supposedly external critique that seeks to transcend the context but a situated and contextualised critique, a historical-political critique, an immanent critique such as that proposed in various Marxist traditions, among them the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, 1937), Althusserian structuralism (Althusser, 1965) and Roy Bhaskar's (1975) critical realism, which was adopted by Ian Parker (1999) in his debate on relativism in discourse analysis.

Immanent critique has several implications, including some that are presently of interest to us and which were already highlighted by Max Horkheimer (1937) in his programmatic text, *Traditional and Critical Theory*. I am referring to the deeper effects of the 'suppression' of distance between the field of politics and our sphere of science, critique and discourse analysis (Horkheimer, 1937, p. 242), namely, the repositioning of our scientific, analytical and critical work as something 'inherent' in society (p. 259), 'dynamically united' with the 'dominated class' (p. 247), internally oriented towards a 'liberating praxis' (p. 263) and a struggle against 'social injustice' (p. 270). Briefly put, a truly immanent critical analysis, like LDA is for some of us, cannot be presented as a method of theoretical and scientific knowledge applied outside of society, but is a strategy of practical and political action on the battlefield of social struggles.

Immanence, understood as an internal connection and essential continuity between critical analytical work and transformative practical action, is an aspect I have stressed in some of my previous works on LDA

(Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014a, 2015a, 2015b). As I have attempted to show, this immanence can be Lacanianly explained by the lack of a metalanguage or *Other of the Other*. Only one language encompasses the analytic text, the analysed text and the context of history and social struggles. Without a metalanguage, we not only will fail to escape this context in our analysis, but also will be unable to distinguish our analytic text from the context and from any text found in it. Our analysis is also a discourse of the big *Other*, whereby the only language, the only *Other*, must analyse itself, since there is no metalanguage or *Other of the Other* (Pavón-Cuéllar & Parker, 2013).

Assuming there is no metalanguage, LDA must take for granted that there is no analytical discourse other than the discourse analysed, no theory different than practice, no scientific knowledge different from political action, no discursive product distinguishable from its production conditions, and no analysed-analytical text that can be isolated from the context of society, culture and history. This simple and important idea is at the heart of my reflections on the relationship between LDA and the historical event. The absence of an ahistorical metalanguage to analyse the language of history is the premise for the four operations that will be performed hereinafter: the reincorporation of history into the discursive sphere, the elucidation of how discourse and discourse analysis can deal with the historical event, the discussion on how this event is dominated by comprehension and explanation, and the consideration of keeping alive the flame of history and revolution through LDA.

Discursive scenario of history

As suggested by Lacan, the plot of history is woven with the threads of language, that is, the 'points of symbolic articulation' (1956, p. 127). The 'signifier' creates the 'event' (1960, p. 308). The words fabricate everything that occurs in the historical dimension. What we call 'history' is 'unified' by a 'symbolic universe' (1954, p. 307). Every event takes place in a discursive 'scenario' (1953, p. 259). It is here, in discourse, where all things happen. They are 'integrated into history' by acquiring a 'symbolic existence' (1954, p. 298).

Undoubtedly, there are traumatic irruptions of the real that seem ineffable, indescribable and irrepresentable, but they will only *have taken place* once they have been symbolically represented through the very words that do not suffice to express them. Although experiences resist expression, they must be expressed by, at the very least, identifying them as that which is inexpressible. Only thus, by being expressed, will they have occurred in the only place where they can: the place of language. Yet, this place includes not only history books, periodicals and other mass information media, but also parliaments and squares as well as streets and battlefields (Lacan, 1953).

When two armies confront each other, the battle is between flags, classes, nations, ideals and other symbolic entities. It is true that bullets penetrate flesh, blood flows, soldiers die, bodies are mutilated and the horrific, anguished experience of all this is too real and seems to be something that escapes words. However, in the strict sense, the event of the battle, that is, the historical event or what historically happened on the ground corresponds to what has been expressed and retained in

words. It is in words, both with and through them, that what has occurred is created.

However real and inexpressible, the event can only take place in the symbolic milieu of words that, paradoxically, do not suffice to express it. Likewise, regardless of how accidental and surprising an event may be, it does not cease to consist of those same words that attempt to foresee and plan it, imbue it with meaning and direction, project it or exorcise it. The words constitute the same real event that has been symbolised or de-realised by them, contained and limited by them, and attenuated, slowed down or stopped by them. Irrespective of the words, there was a real event, and if so, it is also thanks to words. This is a point on which both Deleuze (1969) and Lacan (1960) will insist.

Event and order of discourse

Discourse, the most hostile and unfavourable means for the event, is also the only means through which an event can come to pass. However, this does not exclude the notion that the event may be undone or deactivated under the effect of discourse itself. This is the unfortunate situation in which words end up replacing facts, phrases supplant caresses and demagogic discourses stand for concrete political actions.

The event may be precluded by the very words that made it possible. Thus, words are the condition of the possibility and impossibility of the event. An event is created through words, and when there is no event or there cease to be any, it is also through words, at least in a certain sense. Words, for example, ignite the revolutions that disorder and transform all things, although words also end up drowning them in the ashes of some revolutionary phraseology.

Not only does the event get tangled up and spontaneously lost in words, but discourse also seems to involve efficacious devices whose function is precisely that of making the random event impossible. Foucault (1970) identifies three mechanisms through which the event comes to be dominated by discourse: 'commentary', 'authorship' and 'discipline' (pp. 25–38). Each one of these mechanisms has an aspect—founding text, author's personality and disciplinary specialization—that anchors, controls and restricts discourse, and thus precludes the emergence of the unexpected, uncontrollable, incomprehensible and inexplicable. There can be no true event if discourse impedes any misinterpretation or deviation with respect to the founding text, any inconsistency or incoherence in the figure of the author, and any license or lack of rigour in the discipline. This, perhaps, is why practically nothing with the historical value of the event has occurred in either the century-and-a-half of the discipline of psychology, in the entire opus of Hegel after his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, or throughout the centuries of scholastic commentary on the Bible, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

In Foucault's description of them, commentary, authorship and discipline are mechanisms that strive to dominate the random event at the very site of its appearance. Given that the event irrupts in a discourse that is written, spoken or enacted, we understand that this same discourse must include devices that prevent such irruption. These devices can be appreciated through discourse analysis and should be of particular importance in the Lacanian perspective, where one expects to find greater sensitivity in relation to the event.

Event and Lacanian Discourse Analysis

The event, in fact, is a theme repeatedly pondered by those inspired by Lacan to undertake discourse analysis. From Pêcheux's (1983) classic article, *Structure or Event*, to the chapters in a book I edited with Ian Parker (Parker & Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014), the event constantly captures the attention of scholars who make use of LDA. These scholars are interested in both the irruption of the event in and through words and the obstaculization effectuated by those words. In the latter case, although they do not analyse the devices of authorship, discipline and commentary, which Foucault mentions, they do present valuable observations on other discursive strategies to dominate the event.

The event can be dominated, for instance, by discursive strategies such as the substitution of one compromising term for another (Hook, 2014), normalization of the subject's places (Koren, 2014), transcendental illusion of absolute neutrality (Roberts & Malone, 2014), fantasies that sustain the *status quo* (Glynos, 2014), blindness regarding something that would change everything (Orozco-Guzmán et al., 2014) and recuperation and continuation by other means instead of rupture with the existing order (Homer, 2014). However, the event can also be triggered or enabled through other discursive gestures, processes or situations; for example, uncertainty that institutes the necessity of an act (Neill, 2014), the act itself construed as a critical device (Glynos, 2014), an unguaranteed decision and creation from the real (Gómez-Camarena, 2014), the disorder as a condition of any beginning (Romé, 2014), repetition that favours the return of an encounter (Gerber, 2014) and the cut in the signifying chain that facilitates the occurrence of truth in the instant of the unconscious (Herrera-Guido, 2014).

Lacanian discourse analysts have examined ways in which events are made possible, or impossible, by the discourses analysed. However, with one exception, which I will discuss in a moment, they do not seem to have inquired into the possible events that are favoured or blocked by discourse analysis itself. In other words, the event has not been considered in analytical discourse, but in the discourse analysed. This is due to, among other reasons, the lack of a reflexive turn on the analysis itself, which in general is conceived as a simple approximation to discourse but not a discourse in itself.

The only exception to the lack of reflexivity is found in Saville Young's (2014) account of her own analytic work. Here, the event seems to be made possible through 'transformative moments' in the analysis when 'something unexpected takes place that points productively to the ways in which we are always misread through language' (p. 288). Saville Young even asserts that 'reading is a transformative process both in terms of how my reading of the text through a Lacanian lens serves to surprise and unsettle, but also in the way in which you, the reader, will find your own moments of transformation – moments where you are inside the text, where the words you read seem to become your own, and moments where you are outside it, excluded or barred from knowledge' (pp. 288–289).

Unfortunately, an LDA is not only composed of moments of transformation. The question that arises here is whether these moments can be deliberately provoked. And, if so, how? How can we at least

ensure that our analysis does not operate as one of those discourses that preclude any transformation? How can LDA avoid the strategies that dominate the event?

Discourse analysis as domination of the event

It goes without saying that discourse analysis is nothing more than a discursive configuration (Pavón-Cuéllar & Parker, 2013). It is a discourse that analyses other discourses but avoids analysing itself. This impedes us from perceiving how discourse analysis itself presents devices of domination of the event like those we can discover in other discourses.

To control and obstruct the event, a LDA may be no more than a commentary on Lacan's work through its application and exemplification. LDA may also be completely subjected to either the personal consistency of its author or the limitations of the boring discipline into which Lacanian psychoanalysis is so often converted. It is logical that these devices of discipline, commentary and authorship, as described by Foucault, may operate in our analysis, which is a discourse like any other. As such, it not only can provoke events, but is also equipped with its own inhibitors to impede them.

However, in addition to the devices that prevent an analytic discourse from producing an event, there are other mechanisms of analysis that dominate the event in the discourse analysed. This is so because all discourse analysis is a discourse on another discourse, and, as such, it exercises its power over two discourses, itself and the discourse analysed. Simply put, a discourse analysis is not only a discourse with its own internal mechanisms that dominate its own event, but also a discourse that analyses other discourses, where it can also suffocate or neutralise the event, their event, by impeding it from transcending, being consumed, reaching its ultimate consequences, producing, reproducing or expanding and multiplying its effects. In this case, a discourse analysis, as a supposed meta-discourse, opposes itself to another event that has already been triggered in another discourse, in addition to opposing itself to an event that might be generated within it.

We may say that analytic discourse relates itself to its potential event as well as confronts a real event that has begun through the discourse analysed. We can analyse a revolutionary discourse by Lenin, for example, and confront the October Revolution that was realised in and through it. To dominate this event, the analysis requires mechanisms that retroactively revoke, rectify or deactivate the event in Lenin's discourse only after it has occurred. Here, I shall refer to two such devices that, in my opinion, seem important. One is *comprehension* and the other is *explanation*. Both are capable of neutralising an event, such as the October Revolution, upon their application to a pre-existing text, such as Lenin's revolutionary discourses.

Comprehension

Through the vice of comprehension, which was well known and denounced by Lacan (1954, 1955, 1956), we seek to accede to the 'conscious content' that we attribute to discourse, instead of limiting ourselves to simply reading the discourse in its 'unconscious presence' (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2010, pp. 303–321). In other words, we cease to read

what a discourse says textually—as such, its signifiers—and focus on what we *imagine* that it means or wishes to express. What might the discourse we analyse wish or mean to say? As Lacan (1956) astutely observes, a discourse can only ‘mean to say’ what we want it to tell us (pp. 30–34). This will depend on our desires, prejudices and ideologies, or on the theories that allow us to understand discourse, i.e., the theories that need to be confirmed through discourse. This is what we see in psychological content analyses characteristic of hypothetical–deductive perspectives, in which one always encounters exactly what one seeks, whether it is cognitions, attitudes, prejudices, social representations or some other preconceived material that serves to validate or invalidate our hypothesis.

From the moment we make a hypothesis, we already know what we are going to encounter in discourse, namely the terms of the hypothesis. Everything else must be ignored. What we must overlook is precisely that which we cannot understand—the enigmatic, new, unknown, random and unpredictable, that is, where the very possibility of the event lies. Only then can we conduct a conventional psychological analysis of Lenin’s discourse: an analysis that omits everything that makes this discourse so original, radical, provocative and dangerous by limiting ourselves to what we can understand; for example, a weakened sense of reality, a paranoid vision of the world, a way of coping with anxiety, prejudices against the bourgeoisie or a negative attitude towards capitalism. In this way, our analytical discourse shall have deactivated, through its understanding of the discourse, the event that became the October Revolution and might have not yet ceased to stalk and terrify contemporary capitalism.

We understand that a LDA must discard aspirations to understand, such as those we find in hermeneutics, some narrative approaches and diverse variants of content analysis we encounter in human and social sciences. In fact, according to Lacan, instead of understanding the supposed conscious meaning that a discourse wishes to express, we should try to explain what it says through its structure made up of unconscious words that refer only to other unconscious words and not to conscious meanings. This is what leads us to conclude that LDA must not be comprehensive but explicative, as it must offer an explication of the discourse analysed.

However, as we shall now see, the explication can also be converted into a discursive device to dominate the event. We have arrived at an appreciation of this point thanks to the very young Marx and the late Althusser. It is here, at this very point, where the Marxist–Althusserian standpoint can help Lacanian discourse analysts resist becoming instrumentalised against the event through the weapon of explicative analysis.

Explication

Let us suppose that we are analysing a revolutionary discourse by Lenin and we explain it on the basis of conditions, circumstances, causes and intentions, in which we would include the historical period, the First World War, a certain economic crisis, the personal origin and trajectory of the Bolshevik leader, the internal structure of Russian society, hegemony as strategy, czarism and industrialization, Marxism and the

narodniki. All these factors would determine the event, which, by appearing as the necessary result of its determinants, could be totally reduced to them as if it consisted exclusively of their confluence and interweaving. In this way, the causes of the event would take the place of the event itself. The discursive irruption of the October Revolution would be nothing more than the textual product of a contextual productive apparatus that would be partially revealed to consciousness in the discourse analysed. Thus, analysing the discourse would allow us to explain the event, and by explaining it, we might just end up relegating it to a remote corner like that of the Russia of 1917. It would be in this context, and only in this context, where we could conceive the event, and, in doing so, set it apart from ourselves and protect ourselves from the threat it represents.

Explicative analysis tends to put things in their place, reordering everything and reintegrating the event to the causal structure of an established order. In this way, once again, the event is returned to its enclosure. It is sent back to the same cage from which it had managed to free itself. However, in *this* cage, the event is no longer even an event; instead, what is left is a pure effect whose meaning is no longer inside itself, but rather in the structural factors that determine it. These factors are all there is and their absence involves that of an event assimilated to them.

From the perspective of an explicative analysis, it becomes impossible for anything like the October Revolution to actually exist. This revolution has to be reduced to a series of past determining factors that are no longer in existence: the inexistence of the factors is the inexistence of the event. In fact, from this perspective, the event did not even exist when it seemed to have existed. Its existence was nothing more than an appearance. Beyond the appearance there were only the determining factors that explained it.

Explicative analysis raises the determining factors upon a pedestal of unique existence. These factors are all there is, was, and ever will be. They unfold as a symbolic system closed upon itself. They fill everything, leaving no room for the real or empty, the indeterminate or random, dreams or events, history, 'the register of the unconscious' that Lacan identifies with history (1966a, p. 4) and revolutions or other 'surprises' that Lacan himself expected from history (1966b, p. 199).

Textual indeterminacy

To allow ourselves to be surprised by something, we must stop explaining everything. Explanation must be silenced before those surprising historical, original and founding events that do not allow themselves to be reduced to their determining factors, as Marx (1841) saw in his philosophical thesis on Epicurus and as Althusser (1988) came to perceive near the end of his life. More precisely, what the young Marx and the old Althusser understood is that there have to be events that are founded only upon themselves, effects that envelope their own cause, texts that create their own context, vagaries that disobey necessity, encounters that surpass any distance, collisions that change everything, acts that defy the functioning of the symbolic system, leaps from the impossible to the real without passing through the possible,

unpredictable gestures with which the historical plot is woven and revolutions that are the motor of history.

Marx believed in history and revolutions until the end of his life (e.g. Marx, 1875). Althusser was still young when he regarded the exception as the 'rule of the rule' (Althusser, 1965, p. 105), as the universality of singularity, which is currently conceived by Meillasoux (2006) as the 'necessity of contingency' (pp. 159–161). All this may be recognised as textual indeterminacy in discourse analysis (Parker & Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014), in which we must be aware, as Bakhtin (1924) and Foucault (1969) pointed out, that each discourse may involve a discursive event (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014c). It could not be otherwise when, in Lacan's terminology, there is no big *Other*, nothing and nobody who can successfully avoid revolutions.

We know that Lacan (1970) reduces revolutions to 'rotations' or circular movements that 'return' to their starting points (pp. 420–429). It is true that a movement like the October Revolution freed us from the clutches of Nicholas II only to throw us under the bus that was Stalin (Pavón Cuéllar, 2014b). However, even though the endpoint may be worse than the starting point, it is at least different and promising. Repetition is not the same as reproduction: somethings are produced and some others are no longer as they were. There is history.

There is a historical metonymical displacement because the motor of the revolutionary process, which is that of history, not only describes a rotation like the one Lacan (1970) deplored, but also is a spiral movement as that recognised by Lenin (1914). In Lacanian terms, the circle of the revolution remains open. Its opening is symptomatic proof of the existence of the historical event, of history conceived Lacanianly as the unconscious, as the persistence of the real, symbolic incompleteness, and the void of the object that is the cause of our desire, motivation of our struggle and justification of our belief in what we call *freedom* (Lacan, 1966a, 1966b, 1978). This is precisely the inexplicable that cannot be known but that the symbolic system, in its ambition to achieve absolute knowledge, attempts to reabsorb through the explicative strategy.

Conclusions: towards Marxist revolutionary practice

When we explain effects on the basis of their causes, we are tying the future to the past and enclosing the circle of the revolution in a totality that is meaningful for consciousness. However, there is no revolution that does not remain 'open'; this is what allows us to affirm that revolution is 'permanent' (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014b, pp. 149–152). As much as our explanations try to conclude revolution by closing it in upon itself, revolution remains open, unfinished, something to be done and in process. We cannot know it in its totality because it has not yet ended. The October Revolution has not finished. This is why the system still needs to attack Lenin, either in Kiev or elsewhere.

Lenin still exists. The unconscious is timeless. Revolution continues and we have neither reached the end of history (cf. Fukuyama, 1992) nor touched the end of ideology (cf. Bell, 1960). If we were at the end, why would we continue talking? Why would we multiply discourses? And why would we feel the imperious need to analyse them? Our analysis must respond to the desire that animates it and thus contributes to keeping history and the flame of revolutions alive. This

clearly dismisses the explanation understood as reducing the event to its precipitating factors, but does not thereby exclude explanation in the etymological sense of the term, that is, explanation as understood by Lacan and just as it can be prescribed in LDA. I am considering the idea of explanation as action through which discourse unfolds, develops and evolves through the addition or 'introduction' of new unconscious 'signifiers' that do not pretend to be the conscious meanings of that which is analysed (Lacan, 1958, p. 444; see also Lacan, 1963, pp. 323–336). Nothing here must be avoided. This explanation may be a continuation of history as it is analytical discourse that prolongs the discourse analysed, the discourse of the *Other* and the unconscious, with no pretension to close it around itself in the impoverishing consciousness of the dominant ideology (Pavón-Cuéllar & Parker, 2013). By maintaining the discursive circle open, our LDA shows its respectful consideration of the event and potential utilization in the revolutionary struggle.

The utility of psychoanalysis for revolution, its 'interest in history', as Lacan (1969) once pointed out, lies precisely in keeping the revolutionary circle 'open' (p. 333). This opening must be a central proposal of LDA in studies that aspire to be politically disruptive interventions focused on radical changes in society. In research of this nature, a discourse like that by Lenin must not be reduced to its causes but must produce new effects.

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