Concepts of Temporality in the Theory of Transference

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Abstract
This paper examines the temporal concepts that underlie the theory of transference in psychoanalysis. The paper reviews Freud’s rejection of linear temporality as characteristic of unconscious thought in favour of regression, repetition, and deferred action. It then develops concepts drawn from Jacques Lacan’s theory of the formation of the ego. Here, the biologically determined helplessness derived from the human prematurity of birth becomes transformed into an ego that anticipates subjective unity. The paper then moves on to the more complex theory of the temporality implied in subject formation, offered in Lacan’s later theory of separation. Implications are drawn for the use and understanding of transference in the practice of psychoanalysis via clinical examples. In addition, Lacan’s ideas on subject formation are proposed as an extension and clarification of previous psychoanalytic theories of development.

INTRODUCTION

Lacan’s contribution to the theory of transference is typically discussed in relation to two observations. If we take as an example the study by R. Horacio Etchegoyen, *The Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique* (1991), two chapters are devoted to Lacan’s contribution. The first is derived from his paper ‘Intervention sur le transfert’ (Lacan, 1966[1951]), in which transference is considered to be an imaginary impasse, reflecting the analyst’s own resistance to the dialectical unfolding of analysis and whereby the analyst, at every turn of this dialectic, is required to reveal the truth of the analysand’s discourse. The second chapter that Etchegoyen devotes to Lacan considers his contribution from *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Lacan, 1977[1964]). Here, transference is an artifice of the analytic situation, but its power is based in what Lacan calls the sujet-
supposé-savoir. The analysand supposes that the analyst in some sense knows, but the nature of the supposition provides the means to reveal a mode of deception by which the subject evades the cause of their desire.

No doubt there are more sympathetic receptions of Lacan’s contribution. Both theories have attracted more subtle and comprehensive readings in works by Michel Silvestre (1993), Moustapha Safouan (1988) and Colette Soler (1996, 2002), to name but a few. However, what has attracted less attention is a temporal theory of how transference operates in the practice of psychoanalysis, which is a contribution of at least equal importance to those discussed by Etchegoyen. Although it is difficult to conceptualize, a consideration of temporality brings us much closer to the daily practicalities of analytic work. The interventions used by an analyst cannot be based in an objectified account of time, but must be based in a clear understanding of the manner in which the subject of the unconscious, and, by implication, the subject at play in the transference, operates according to its own specific temporality. Based largely in a reading of Lacan’s text ‘Position of the unconscious’ (1995[1964]), this paper will articulate these temporal concepts and, more specifically, show how the operation of transference in the clinical practice of psychoanalysis can be derived from the temporality implied in Lacan’s account of the causation of the subject, which I will refer to simply as subject formation. I will begin with a clinical example to illustrate the main themes to be developed in this paper.

**ACCOUNTING FOR LOST TIME**

This analysand found himself to be one of the most interesting people he had ever met. Indeed, he was devoted to doing everything interesting: acquiring lists of credentials along with numerous testimonials to his achievements. A significant proportion of his analysis was consumed with their lengthy and detailed description. At a certain point it was necessary to punctuate the sessions so as to force his hand, and this led to his practice of accounting for lost time. The punctuation of sessions was perceived to be a disruption, a cut, and finally a deprivation. After a series of sessions shortened in this manner he begins: ‘Now . . . you owe me some time’. The analysand had meticulously added up the amount of time he considered to be lost. But the loss was not irrecuperable since it was now what I owed him. It was not surprising that he could give exacting details of this debt of time, which I had unwittingly accrued. While being well aware of the practice of sessions with varying time and, moreover, agreeing to it with
enthusiasm, the reality of these specific punctuations induced a turning point in his analysis. He concluded by transforming his sense of being robbed into a supposition within the transference: ‘Is it because I’m so boring that you want to get rid of me?’

This question was familiar without ever having been spoken. Prior to this moment, instead of posing the question to the person from whom it had originated, he came to realize that he had been performing to an audience which, after having acknowledged the proper addressee of this particular utterance, could be seen to be missing the member for whom his performances really counted. The analysis of this moment in the transference showed that he was repeating an exchange between himself and his mother. What was even more striking was that the statement that he bored his mother had never actually been made, but instead he had always perceived it to be implied in their interactions. So it became possible to unravel the transference, which revealed the interpersonal strategy he adopted to be based in his interpretation of the Other’s desire.

This clinical example illustrates that a significant turn in the treatment occurred with reference to the punctuation of the sessions. To understand this event and, more generally, the manner in which transference operates in analysis, it is necessary to draw upon a psychoanalytic theory of temporality. This particular analysand considered that the time spent in sessions was his possession of which he was being deprived and thus time was objectified. This case is reminiscent of Lacan’s original remarks regarding what he tentatively referred to as his ‘experiments’ with logical time, which included the comment that using this technique he was able to produce ‘in a certain male subject fantasies of anal pregnancy, as well as a dream of its resolution by Cesarean section’ (Lacan, 2002b[1953], p. 98). In fact, it is obvious that in this moment of his analysis, this analysand similarly considers that his analyst regards him as a ‘boring shit’, to be unceremoniously discarded from the sessions without warning. But what is of the utmost importance is that this transferential meaning that is attributed to the analyst’s desire can be analysed; that is, the history through which this subject takes that particular position in relation to the Other can be shown through his experience of transference.

**FREUDIAN TIME**

In psychoanalysis, when we speak of time we are not referring to an external measure, the time of clocks and calendars, but something intrinsic to the psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious and its subject. So, in order to clarify the temporal dimension of
transference it is necessary to understand first the temporal dimension of the formation of the subject. Such a theory is imbedded in Freud’s work, although one can be led astray by Freud’s rejection of the theory of time as a linear sequence that reflects only the conscious-perceptual apparatus’s access to the presentation of events in the external world. Freud repeatedly stated that the unconscious is timeless, and as early as Draft M, written in 1897, he stated that the unconscious ignores the chronological connections of the material it uses when forming fantasies (Freud, 1897, p. 252). Freud considered that the linear time of our conscious relation to the external world, in which events are ordered chronologically, had no relevance to the logic of displacement and condensation by which the unconscious orders its material. In the most explicit discussion from his paper ‘The unconscious’, he writes:

Further, it devolves upon the system Pcs. to make communication possible between the different ideational contents so that they can influence one another, to give them an order in time, and to set up a censorship or several censorships; ‘reality-testing’ too, and the reality-principle, are in its province. Conscious memory, moreover, seems to depend wholly on the Pcs. (Freud, 1915e, p. 188)

While objective time belongs to the Preconscious/Conscious system and, curiously, so too the memory of the past, elsewhere Freud’s account of the phenomenon of transference implies a set of temporal concepts.

Freud’s account of transference requires the concepts of history, repetition, and regression, all of which have a temporal, although non-linear, dimension and are essentially derivatives of the drive theory. In a passage added to ‘The interpretation of dreams’ in 1914, Freud writes:

Three kinds of regression are thus to be distinguished; a. topographical regression, in the sense of the schematic picture [of the psychical apparatus]; b. temporal regression, in so far as what is in question is a harking back to older psychical structures; and c. formal regression, where primitive methods of expression and representation take the place of the usual ones. All these three kinds of regression are, however, one at bottom and occur together as a rule; for what is older in time is more primitive in form and in psychical topography lies nearer to the perceptual end. (Freud, 1900a, p. 548.)

Regression requires what Laplanche and Pontalis call ‘a genetic succession’ of ‘the subject’s reversion to past phases of his development’ (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 385). The concept of regression
assumes that the various stages of infantile psycho-sexual development follow each other in a predetermined order. Freud’s view on this matter was not firmly established by the time of writing his ‘Three essays on the theory of sexuality’ (Freud, 1905d), but constitutes a position he arrives at around 1910–1912, probably in conjunction with Ferenczi’s work on stages of reality and Abraham’s initial studies of oral libido. Without pausing here to elaborate these historical details, it suffices to say that the deception of a neat unfolding of ‘genetic development’ bears much of the responsibility for directing psychoanalytic theories of development down a scientifically lonesome blind alley.

**ANTICIPATION AND RETROACTIVITY**

Jacques Lacan provides an explicit reconsideration of the temporality of the unconscious. In 1949, Lacan introduces the notion of logical time based on a sophism that has become known as the prisoners’ dilemma (Lacan, 1988[1945]). These first forays into a new analytic time follow directly from Lacan’s thesis regarding symbolic structures. Retroactivity is an effect of the dominance of synchrony over diachrony, to which Lacan subscribes as a result of the structuralism inherent in his theory of symbolic systems, largely borrowed from Lévi-Strauss. In this paper on logical time, the subject’s self-recognition is given by and through a set of calculated interchanges with the Other, in a manner which is reminiscent of game strategies and clearly influenced by cybernetics. In the initial temporal theories from the 1940s and early 1950s, time is a series of intersubjective rules or, as in the analysis of the purloined letter (Lacan, 1972[1956]), the intersubjective configuration is externally imposed into the situation. This assumes that temporality is situated in the intersubjective codes that govern interactions between predetermined subjects, constituting the parameters of their actions and interactions, giving rise to structural effects that are certainly ‘trans-individual’ but ultimately presuppose the status of the subject. Although these early ideas are important, they fail to demonstrate how temporality is inherent in what Paul Verhaeghe (2004) has recently referred to as the subject’s formation.

Beyond these preliminary accounts of temporality, the first major contribution to the role of temporality in the formation of the subject must be discussed in terms of the mirror stage and more specifically Lacan’s notion that the human neonate is born biologically premature. Although this is a widely known aspect of Lacan’s theory, it is not frequently acknowledged that in ‘Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety’ Freud had already commented on this idea:
Intra-uterine existence seems to be short in comparison with that of most animals, and it is sent into the world in a less finished state. As a result, the influence of the real external world upon it is intensified and an early differentiation between the ego and the id is promoted. Moreover, the dangers of the external world have a greater importance for it, so that the value of the object which can alone protect it against them and take the place of its former intra-uterine life is enormously enhanced. The biological factor, then, establishes the earliest situations of danger and creates the need to be loved which will accompany the child through the rest of its life. (Freud, 1926d[1925], pp. 154–155)

Later, the idea that the neonate is premature and thus especially vulnerable to both injury or predation if left unattended becomes a central tenet for John Bowlby in proposing that human attachment is an innate species adaptation which has evolved through directional selection during evolutionary history (Bowlby, 1982[1969]; see also Simpson, 1999, p. 116).

Lacan’s ideas are not incompatible with Bowlby’s but the emphasis is more on prematurity as predisposing the subject to anticipate. A fuller account is given in ‘Some reflections on the ego’:

Here physiology gives us a clue. The human animal can be regarded as one which is prematurely born. The fact that the pyramidal tracts are not myelinated at birth is proof enough of this for the histologist, while a number of postural reactions and reflexes satisfy the neurologist. The embryologist too sees in the ‘foetalization’, to use Bolk’s term, of the human nervous system, the mechanism responsible for Man’s superiority to other animals – viz. the cephalic flexures and the expansion of the fore-brain. His lack of sensory and motor co-ordination does not prevent the new-born baby from being fascinated by the human face, almost as soon as he opens his eyes to the light of day, nor from showing in the clearest possible way that from all the people around him he singles out his mother. (Lacan, 1953[1951], p. 15)

These comments foreshadow the findings of numerous developmental studies that have repeatedly confirmed and expanded both the physiological and neurological prematurity of the infant. Lacan’s use of Bolk (1960[1926]) is now somewhat outdated (see Gould, 1977) but the general principle of the biological prematurity of the neonate still holds. More importantly for our argument, the capacity for imitation of facial gestures (Meltzoff and Moore, 1977) and to discern and differentiate the mother’s face, voice, and smell (Anderson, 1983) indicate a foundational subject–other dialectic.

Lacan’s argument concerning the special significance of the mirror stage is derived from the species-specific disjuncture between the ‘specific prematurity of birth’ in man (Lacan, 2002a[1949], p. 6) and the
infant’s imitative self-recognition. This results in an early disposition towards the image of both self and other and is fundamental in the formation of the Ego. However, what appears uniquely in Lacan’s account is that subject formation at the level of the assumption of an image is bound up with what he calls a ‘temporal dialectic’, whereby he adds that such a dialectic ‘projects the formation of the individual into history’ (ibid., p. 6). In this comment one might be tempted to hear the resonance of the Kleinian emphasis on projection. However, this seems to me to be largely consistent with the strong phenomenological basis of this argument, since the idea that Dasein is projected into its future is central to Heidegger’s discussion in Being and Time (Heidegger, 1962[1927]). This influence is even clearer in Lacan’s early attempt to elaborate the temporality of anticipation in the theory of the imaginary formation of the ego as an anticipated image of unity that the subject seeks to counter the fragmented experience of its body. Consider Lacan’s analysis in the 1953 text ‘The neurotic’s individual myth’:

[T]he subject always has an anticipatory relationship to his own realization which in turn throws him back onto the level of a profound insufficiency and betokens a rift in him, a primal sundering, a thrownness, to use the Heideggerian term. It is in this sense that what is revealed in all imaginary relationships is an experience of death: an experience doubtless inherent in all manifestations of the human condition, but especially visible in the life of the neurotic. (Lacan, 1979[1953], pp. 422–423)

Thus, the human infant is thrown forward into existence, at which point he or she already has a history. In a comment that shows that the mirror stage is more than a developmental stage in a genetic order, Lacan notes that this moment precipitates a sublation of biological ‘insufficiency to anticipation’. There is never a pure moment of ‘psychological birth’, but a temporal split between coming into being and always already having a history. Unlike for Bowlby, insufficiency is never resolved with adequate maternal care, but is raised on to a symbolic level where a subject’s desire is experienced as a lifetime of anticipation. Although at this point Lacan’s comments refer to the identifications in which the early ego is formed, the alienation inherent in any process of identification means that the only being a subject has is always anticipated in the future.

While the imaginary functions through futural anticipation, a second aspect of temporality, that of retroactivity derived from the symbolic operation of language, shows that the reality of the past is actually a construction of the present. Lacan’s position is incompatible
with any simplistic view that psychoanalysis is concerned with an unproblematic past of the subject. One finds an early example when Lacan comes to the rescue of Melanie Klein, making exactly this point in ‘Some reflections on the ego’:

What relation does the ‘libidinal subject’ whose relationships to reality are in the form of an opposition between Innenwelt and an Umwelt have to the ego? To discover this, we must start from the fact – all too neglected – that verbal communication is the instrument of psycho-analysis. Freud did not forget this when he insisted that repressed material such as memories and ideas which, by definition, can return from repression, must, at the time when the events in question took place, have existed in a form in which there was at least the possibility of its being verbalised. By dint of recognizing a little more clearly the supra-individual function of language, we can distinguish in reality the new developments which are actualised by language. Language has, if you care to put it like that, a sort of retrospective effect in determining what is ultimately decided to be real. Once this is understood, some of the criticisms which have been brought against the legitimacy of Melanie Klein’s encroachments into the pre-verbal areas of the unconscious will be seen to fall to the ground. (Lacan, 1953[1951], p. 11)

This intervention could have been quite decisive in the controversial debates between Melanie Klein and her critics, such as Anna Freud and Edward Glover, whereby both parties debated the possibility of discrete phenomena and, most especially, unconscious phantasies that are non-verbal and non-visual representations of object relations derived from primitive bodily experiences occurring in the first months of life (King and Steiner, 1991). With Lacan’s renewal of the question of the subject and temporality, the status of any infantile event and its remembering is over-determined by the synchronic organization of language. The apparent historical reality of development is replaced in Lacan’s thinking by the retroactive effect of meaning that, without denying that there is a reality to actual developmental events, determines whatever interpretation of these events comes to be taken up by a subject as their specific history.

**HISTORICITY AND THE FUTURE ANTERIOR**

As Lacan begins to turn towards the historicity of the subject, his theory moves closer to a consideration of time as inherent in the definition of the subject. The third section of Lacan’s ‘Rome discourse’ is entitled ‘The resonances of interpretation and the time of the subject in psychoanalytic technique’. He writes:
What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect \[le \text{ parfait}\] as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming. (Lacan, 2002b[1953], p. 84)

The grammatical structure of language is determinative of the possibilities of apprehending the subject, but what in English we call tense of verbs gives rise to several different ways of understanding the past. By favouring the future anterior tense, Lacan captures the effect of the unconscious as it creates the subject retroactively. Psychoanalysis can be considered such a process of becoming. The future anterior is a time that splits the subject, becoming in the future what can at that point be seen as one’s past and thus what one is at any one time is never complete.

As a grammatical and thus symbolic form, Lacan’s future anterior refers more specifically to the subject of the unconscious as always futurally disposed, forever open to a future contingency which may retroactively re-transcribe the past. When Lacan comments that ‘Analysis can have as its goal only the advent of true speech and the subject’s realization of his history in its relation to a future’ (ibid., p. 86), he is describing a subject of the unconscious that requires both retroactivity and futural anticipation as the temporal modes of its historicity. The realization of a division between these two temporal modes is impossible to prescribe, since by saying that a subject is formed with a futural disposition \textit{it already implies} that there was something lacking in its history. The realization of this division will always be the goal of the psychoanalytic experience for Lacan. It follows, therefore, that the subject in psychoanalysis never has a pure ‘eventhood’; there is never a simple advent or revelation of the subject. Rather, the subject is within a rhythm of closure and opening. The simple difference is that an analysand chooses to speak into this void while an analyst will take up the position of listening to the reverberations of this void in the speech of the analysand.

The more radical consequences of the division of temporality can be developed in order to link the closure of the unconscious in the moment of transference. Such a moment of closure in analytic practice gives rise to transference as a repetition and, as we saw in the clinical example, the analysis is provided with a demonstration of the means by which division for that subject is occluded. The opening of the unconscious in analysis arises with the production of an enunciation – ‘Is it because I am so boring . . .’ – which opens itself to a futural determination while, \textit{at the same time}, retroactively giving meaning to a previous relationship to the Other.
THE TEMPORALITY OF SEPARATION

Logical time is neither an objective logic that a subject obeys nor a logic that a subject employs, but a logic required to account for the concept of the subject in its relation to the Other (Lacan, 1988[1945]). Lacan tends to favour a topologically based theory of this relationship that responds to the emergence of new aspects of this dialectic. From the period in which ‘Position of the unconscious’ was composed, the relationship of the subject and Other moves from the previous inter-subjective and thus reciprocal logic to a revised account of the ultimate non-reciprocity between subject and Other through the processes of alienation and separation. In a sense, the theory of separation allows one to conceptualize how it might be that the subject is not doomed to repeat the same structural position in relation to the Other indefinitely, that is the problem of the interminable analysis. The realization of the subject’s division would require something that is eventually irreducible to repetition.

For Lacan the description of the formation of the subject hinges on an argument for the conjunction of two lacks, that of the subject and that of the Other. Their relationship is not properly described as simply dialectical or reciprocal. Lacan argues in ‘Position of the unconscious’, with regard to the process of separation, that the subject finds itself in the signifying chain at the interval between signifiers, implying that the alienation in the signifying chain is primary. Here the subject experiences ‘something that motivates him other than the effects of meaning by which a discourse solicits him’ (Lacan, 1995[1964], p. 272). Lacan calls this an ‘encounter’ with the opacity of the Other’s desire; emphasizing its radical priority to any signification or image of desire. The subject responds to this lack in the Other by placing there ‘his own lack’; that is, the lack he would like to produce through his own disappearance, a disappearance which has already been fore-shadowed by the process of alienation but not given a form until, in the process of separation, the subject disguises his own lack using the lack of the Other. Such a conjunction of lacks forms a subject as a relation to the Other, as both the realm of desire and the means by which he avoids desire’s subjective implications.

Although neurosis is not specifically mentioned in these passages, it could be surmised that the neurotic’s impasse is that in response to this opacity of the Other’s desire, the subject’s staging of his own disappearance only substitutes the opacity of his own being as a subject derived from the effect of alienation in the signifying chain. Being in the realm of the signifier does not provide an answer to the encounter with the Other’s lack and so the opacity remains. This impasse
involves the neurotic subject in a continual and anxious ricochet between the Other’s desire and the subject’s own lack, which is the typical clinical situation for a neurotic at the beginning of analysis.

This description of the process of separation can be readily applied to the analytic situation. There are two temporalities at play in the analytic situation. The first is that described above, in which the analysand operates according to alienation and separation, a kind of pulsation in their attempt to resolve their own lack via the Other’s lack. (Lacan, 1995[1964], p. 267) In the second temporal moment we can locate the analyst’s syncopated response. In effect, the moment when the analyst’s cut takes place is at the point just shy of the analysand’s attempt to use the analyst’s lack as a cover of his own lack. Therefore, if the analysis is to be successful, the analyst never quite fits the force of repetition that operates, which is a disquieting experience for both parties. An analysis introduces into the transference an Other that is not in a reciprocal relation to the subject, nor in a position to give back to the subject his own message in an inverted form. The analyst’s desire is instead totally unable to be assimilated.

However, at this point Lacan adds a strenuous differentiation of the temporality of the signifier from that of trauma and symptom formation: ‘Nachträglichkeit or deferred action, by which trauma becomes involved in symptoms, reveals a temporal structure of a higher order’ (ibid., p. 268). This proposition amounts to a return to Freud in the sense that Freud’s elaboration of deferred action was originally in terms of trauma, which is by definition something excessive and irreducible to a signifying effect. The premature experience of sexual excitation is traumatic and, as such, logically precludes its entry into the signifying realm. Instead the traumatic component of sexuality repeats. The repetition of what can only be described as the real is repeated precisely because it is not of the order of the signifier. As the etymology of the word trauma suggests, it leaves behind a trace or wound, the marker of its having taken place or the imprint of its having impinged upon the integrity of the subject. Such a symptomatic repetition of trauma cannot be assimilated to Lacan’s initial model of repression as metaphoric, nor can the symptom be reduced to an effect of meaning, so it is very interesting to see how, as these aspects of symptom formation, trauma, and repetition begin to defy his early enthusiasm for a purely structuralist account, Lacan begins to mark out exactly how sexuality is implied in the unconscious, and how it is implicit in repetition, and thus how it arises in the transference.

The sexuality of the partial drives is neither of the structural order of the signifier nor of the temporality of separation that we have
previously elaborated, but situated in between the two and thus supposing the operation of both. The effects of signifying structure arise via retroactivity and these effects of meaning derived from the unconscious are actually a form of closure. On the other hand, desire and the act of interpretation are futurally disposed. Yet at this point we also have the time of sexuality that escapes both meaning effects and the expression of desire. The real that is at the heart of repetition is both continually repeated and always missed.

The occlusion produced by repetition accounts for the apparent heterogeneity and multiplicity of a subject’s relation to their sexuality and also the commonly encountered alterity or excess of sexuality. This explains the great clinical difficulty in moving towards the reduction of this polymorphic perversity, and the foreign agent to the sexuality which underlies it and which belongs indubitably to the singularity of each subject. The function of sexuality in the transference indicates Lacan’s Freudian commitment to an irreducible kernel of the real in psychoanalysis situated at the level of human sexuality. The only difference is that Lacan would assert beyond Freud that the more radical division is not that between conscious and unconscious but that between the experience of jouissance and the subject who thinks.

CONCLUSION

We argued that the formation of the subject in the subject–Other relation requires the overlap of the subject and the Other’s lack, thus constituting the subject’s desire as futurally disposed. The subject of the unconscious is always arriving from the future and this is what brings the subject into a transferential relation with the Other. In the section on the temporality of trauma we argued, despite the orthodox Lacanian view, that Lacan actually recognized that retroactivity is not confined to a symbolic mechanism which produces meaning effects. Rather, in a sense returning to Freud, retroactivity describes the manner in which what cannot be represented is repeated: trauma is one example and so too is sexuality. In the longest reaches of the logic of repetition, and in the need to return to something unrepresentable that lies within it, we have the expression of the most radical anteriority. It took the genius of Freud to name the movement towards this point as the death drive, the most radical point to which a subject seeks to return. However, in choosing the seemingly misplaced term of death, Freud alerts us to a kind of circulation, since this point is both one of return to an anterior state as well as death, as the anticipatory and inconceivable inevitability. This movement, silent within the transference, is the ultimate expression of what psychoanalysis can recognize
as the drive, which is also the fullest development of the mode of sexuality. This push towards death is there in the transference.

References


