# Speech, Event, Desire:
# Psycho-Pedagogical Perspectives about the Symptom

*Chiara Agagiù*

## Abstract

The symptom, which plays a crucial role in the psychological sciences, in this study will be primarily approached from its ontological status: regarding the human being as a lingual being, the symptom will be seen as speech emerging from the unconscious or a device to be analyzed in its own language, made of rhetorical figures that suspend the arbitrary correlation between signifier and meaning. For the purposes of this study, it is crucial to sustain an ethical-pedagogical view: the symptom, dealing with the truth of the self, will be considered the base for a discourse centered on the subject. In this way, the reach of Care will be expanded, while a stance for the pedagogical action will be defined based on the transference dynamics activated in self-formation. In the analysis of subjectivation, intended as the process by which one becomes a subject, language reveals itself as a central point (even if it is not the only dimension involved), because it does not concern a mere question of transmission of information. In fact, the transference dynamics are founded on psychoanalytical issues dealing with desire, the keystone for interpreting a theoretical research guided by a Lacanian perspective in the psycho-pedagogical field.

**Key words:** *symptom; subjectivation; unconscious; language; self-formation; psycho-pedagogy; Lacanian psychoanalysis*

## *The Symptom as Language: A Discourse That Fits the Subject*

In both clinical lexicon and common language, the word 'symptom' [from gr. σύμπτωμα 'happening, accident'] indicates a condition of disease, representing the existence of something distancing the subject from its 'normal' status. In semeiotics—the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation in medical science—the symptom differs from the sign in that the latter always represents *something*. In contrast, the symptom epitomizes singular and characteristic figures emanating from the subject. Borrowing the term from clinical lexicon, in the present article the intention is to examine the symptom as a pedagogical *dispositif* ('device')[1], and the opening of this semantic field is driven from a clinical pedagogy[2] that places the subject's speech at its core.

Assuming that human beings are *lingual beings* – quoting Lacan, *parlêtre* – the subject will be considered here as a *narrating identity*. In Jacques Lacan's *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1966) – a work largely influenced by Saussure's structuralism – language is defined as a *big Other* and, entering the Symbolic Register, represents the initial step the subject makes (first, unconsciously) toward accessing the state of culture. Language, however, which is the same for everyone, is a fundamental issue, though not unique, regulating self-formation. Therefore, it is the particular way by which a human being produces subjectivity and creates a linguistic code that generates the unrepeatability of the subject as well as its constitutive paradox[3].

"Ça parle!" Lacan would say. Even the unconscious is structured as a language and so it speaks, but its language is a discourse created by rhetorical figures. Its formations could be considered heralds of unheard tales, at times cryptic, where the link between signifier and meaning is suspended. To allow the unconscious to speak means to leave room for the disruptive *parrhesia* of the symptom, even if it presents itself with an obscure and diffused appearance.

> Lacanian psychoanalysis changes the symptom from its disease status to a new one; the symptom becomes a text, a novel, a book in which the emotional story of our lives is condensed (the "unthought known"). In this text, metaphorically, and following Freud's lesson, there are some unreadable paragraphs, or pages written in a language we are unable to translate because it is not ours, it is not our conscious language. The subject does not understand the language by which the book of his psychic life is written so such passages develop into utterances, precisely symptoms, which, far from being amended, ask for a transcription, a decoding (Pesare, 2017, p. 108).

Carrying an epiphanic truth related to the unconscious, the symptom forges a dialogue between the psychoanalytical field and a psycho-pedagogical 'narratology' (cfr. Demetrio, 2017).

If we consider the discourse of the subject as the concrete manifestation of a narrating identity – a singular and unrepeatable sort of

[1] Here the term 'device' (dispositif) refers to the Deleuzian theory of *subjectivation* which follows the Foucauldian lesson of a production of subjectivity into a device. (Deleuze, 1989; 2020)

[2] Scientific literature covering the multidisciplinary dialogue between the philosophy of education and the psychoanalytical field is referenced here following the approach to clinical pedagogy initiated by Riccardo Massa—work which has been continued through the years by his school. (Massa, 1992; Orsenigo & Ulivieri Stiozzi. 2018; Riva, 2000; 2004). Regarding pedagogical epistemology, the critical analysis carried by the *Umbildung* theory provides an educational perspective, placing attention on transformation during the self-formation (cfr. Gennari, 2001; Sola, 2003; Semeraro, 2007).

[3] Although in his first 'structuralist' phase (1950s) it appears that Lacan was giving more importance to the register of the Symbolic and all that concerns language, in the development of his theory, a mutual dependence on the three registers was reached, represented by the topological figure of the Borromean knot. Even the question of the symptom is involved in the development of his theory since, from a first symbolic perspective, it developed into reconsideration of its ontological status, attributing to it a certain amount of the Real (*sympthome*) (De Luca Picione, 2020).

sense-construction – then it is necessary to have a hermeneutic approach to extend the reach of Care from its clinical setting to the transference that moves all subjectivation processes.

For the French psychoanalyst, "the self is structured as a symptom […]" Assuming that the self, like the unconscious, has a linguistic structure, the language of the self is already spoken for, it is the language of an otherness that has entered us…the otherness becomes recognizable by virtue of the unconscious' solicitations and provocations. (Fabbri, 2020, p.111).

As Maurizio Fabbri underlines, the first encounter with the otherness of the language is the assumption of an arbitrary linguistic structure, a code to be adopted in order to communicate with others. This self/other relationship is fundamental for a lingual being and it is the place for subjectivation. All these processes are characterized by a transformative motion. To ensure the subject is not a victim of its own symptom a non-normalizing perspective is required, one which would not put the subject in this shape but be inclined to look at all transference dynamics driving self-transformation.

## *The Symptom as an Event: Transformation in Self-formation*

Looking back on the etymology of the word 'symptom' with 'happening' as its main characteristic and assuming the subject establishes itself as a symptom, each step of the subjectivation process has to be considered as guided internally by transformation:

> The substantive σύμπτωμα…leads us to a semantic area connected to Heideggerean *Ereignis* – the existence intended as an 'event' – so that human subjectivity just *happens*…it is a continuous and lifelong project. Hence, the pedagogical subject is – metonymically – the expression of its own symptom, presenting itself as a self-creation with its educational background containing its essence in continuous interpretation like a hermeneutic duty (Pesare, 2017, p. 12).

The subjectivation is far from the Aristotelian entelechy; it is not seen as a destiny that is already written, while the self-realization is not the final form of some potential identity draft, radically inscribed somewhere within the subject. Instead, it is intended as an *Umbildung* process made of what happens occasionally. (Sola, 2003) Assuming this, the 'happening' dimension of the symptom is related to the *truth* of the subject. In this way, following Michel Foucault's thinking, the symptom can be considered a device, a *technology of the self*. In his studies on culture[4], the French philosopher analyzed both the relationship between self-care and pedagogy, and the one between self-care and self-knowledge. The *technologies of the self*, according to Foucault, allow subjects – by themselves or with the help of others – to complete a certain number of operations on their bodies or souls enabling them to realize a concrete transformation with the aim of reaching a certain amount of "happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality." (Foucault, 1988, p.18)

According to Foucault, "there is no instilling of truth without an essential position of alterity: truth is never the same; there can only be truth in the form of another world, another life." (Foucault, 2009, p. 311) The relationship between the subject and its truth postulates an alliance with its own symptom. The attention to language and speech also expects to find a *Subject supposed to know* for the establishment of a transference based on *desire:*

> Therefore, for each subject exists 'someone,' Lacan says, that offers him the possibility to turn his symptom into a sense, provided that this someone is invested in a transference i.e. under the condition that he is ascribed the amount of

[4] "My objective for more than twenty-five years has been to sketch out a history of the different ways humans develop knowledge about themselves in our culture: economics, biology, psychiatry, medicine, and penology." (Foucault, 1988, pp.17-18).

knowledge necessary for the subject to create the sense he is not able to decipher. Lacan defines this 'someone' as the *Subject supposed to know*, in other words, a subject that has some knowledge about the unconscious desire of the other (Pesare, 2017, p. 108).

Following both the Foucauldian image of the master and the Lacanian *Subject supposed to know* it is possible to enter a wider understanding of Care connected to the pedagogical transference realized in the relationship with otherness.

## *From Symptom to Sense: Desire, Ethics, Care*

In pedagogy, Care assumes the Foucauldian master's position given he is the one who cares about the other caring for himself. Luigina Mortari underlines that to know oneself and to help the other know himself better is the main purpose of teaching, implying the ethical dimension of this mutual sharing where, in the application of language, it:

> […] is shaped in relation to reality and is not merely expressive. Therefore, it is crucial to assume an ethical responsibility of the word. We cannot ignore a word ethic in writing that contributes to self-care […] (Mortari, 2020, p. 45).

Thus, it is in the act of caring that one finds the connection between clinic and pedagogy; the care is not to normalize, and the educational act is not to give a shape to the subject, but rather connected to the truth and the will of the subject. Better yet, the care is the interpreter of the individual's unconscious desire, with transference giving sense to the untranslatable symptom of the subject. It is in this way that the eroticism of teaching is implied: knowing how to make oneself the interpreter of the deficiency which is the desire to know.
The relationship is – even if in a dialogue – asymmetrical because the position of the master (as a *Subject supposed to know*) has the *àgalma* (*the object of desire*) which becomes the vector for the transmission of knowledge:

> […] by the triggering of those communicative dynamics Lacan defines as *full word*, detaching the subject in the process of self-formation from a homologating dimension, thus presenting him with the possibility of accessing his most congenial vision of the world (Pesare, 2017, p.113).

The *full word* represents the opposite of the *empty word*, of the ritual derived from a (linguistic) ideological superstructure of reality. Here it is worthwhile referencing Slavoj Žižek's approach to symptom in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989):

> Precisely because of such a notion of social 'excesses', Lacan pointed out that it was Marx who invented the symptom: Marx's great achievement was to demonstrate how all phenomena which appear to everyday bourgeois consciousness as simple deviations, contingent deformations and degenerations of the 'normal' functioning of society (economic crises, wars, and so on), and as such abolishable through amelioration of the system, are necessary products of the system itself- the points at which the 'truth', the immanent antagonistic character of the system, erupts. To 'identify with a symptom' means to recognize in the 'excesses', in the disruptions of the 'normal' way of things, the key offering us access to its true functioning. This is similar to Freud's view that the keys to the functioning of the human mind were dreams, slips of the tongue, and similar 'abnormal' phenomena (Žižek, 1989, p. 144).

In those same years, the Slovene philosopher uses the metaphor of the symptom not just to characterize the punk subculture and artistic avant-gardes in the period preceding Slovenia's independence, but also to strengthen the structure of his critique of ideology. He quotes (not by chance) the epigraph of the *Interpretation of Dreams*, "Flectere si nequeo Superos Acheronta movebo," (Aeneis, VII, 312), translating the second term of the chiasmus as "moving the Underground." (Žižek, 2005, p. XIII). The Virgilian hexameter becomes here the emblem of the critique to ideology: it decomposes and reinterprets the Latin line, the Virgilian *Superos* (Gods, the Law), in a

laic context corresponding to ideology, thus, in the dominant discourse. The murky infernal muds that in *Traumdeutung* represent the free will of the unconscious and the repression that resurfaces in the oneiric dimension, are defined here as the *Underground*: a terrain for desire's revenge.

> And the subjectivation? Simply said: the first narration – the speech of a reformed thought driven by empathy – is able to free the subject from all trauma, inferences, and repressions that reduce the self into a symptom. The other, against a narration of the crisis, risks exposing it to violent and humiliating processes, reminding it of rituals in the past…. Rituals without values risk putting themselves in an extra-linguistic and extra-cultural area in which Lacan places *jouissance*, but *jouissance* tends toward homeostasis not transformation or evolution! (Fabbri, 2020, p. 118).

'Enjoyment' is the translation of *jouissance* which in Lacanian theory is *beyond the pleasure principle*. It disregards the *desire* that, in contrast to the homeostasis produced by enjoyment, propels the *Selbstbildung* (self-formation) process.

> Desire is the word that binds Care to Ethics—an ethics which differs from moral judgment and which does not overlap with the *Highest Good* (defined by Lacan as a bourgeois dream). Nevertheless, it resembles an "ethical-pedagogical dimension where the subject assumes desire as his most cherished possession, as the most original truth about his life" (Pesare, 2017, p. 122).

"Have you acted in accordance with your desire?"[5] Lacan asks. The symptom, therefore, can be considered a device capable of telling something else, something more, something that comes close to the subject's truth. The symptom is a shaky, restless, heterogeneous cornerstone of a subject who is inevitably crossed out, who – paraphrasing Lacan and with respect to Descartes – thinks of where he is not and *is* where he does not think. For this reason, the ethical stance is a meeting of words where the subject exists through the unconscious which springs up the moment the subject uses language, where it encounters *the otherness*, and the urgency of his own truth is always the first question. Embracing this perspective, the subject is gifted the symptom, "not to abandon him with his suffering, but to decode the message in the bottle of his irreducible peculiarity." (Pesare, 2017, p.128)

For this reason, encounters like these are based on transference, where the signifiers' analysis is seen as a symbolization process in which to reinterpret the past with new meanings. It is from the future of the interpretation that the understanding of the past arrives (*après-coup*), and transference is a necessary illusion by which some truth is produced; this is the meaning of a symptom. Something that resists symbolization exists and here the question is drafted. As previously stated, in the first phase of his theory, Lacan was mostly influenced by Structuralism, but he dedicated more attention to the register of the Real as his thinking developed (Lacan, 1976, 2005). It is worthwhile to remember, when discussing ontology, that Lacan emphasizes that the symptom is a signifier carrying a certain amount of *jouis-sence*. The *sympthome* (spelled with an 'h' and 'e') guarantees the existence of our essence in the world:

> In other words, symptom is the way we - the subjects - 'avoid madness', the way we 'choose something (the symptom-formation) instead of nothing (radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic universe)' through the binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying (Žižek, 1989, p. 81).

Thus, in terms of self-formation, recognition of a symptom is considered a gift. By identifying with a symptom, the subject gains personal perspective about his particular position in the Real of the world. Therefore, the act of caring should move in this courageous direction.

[5] "Avez-vous agi conformément au désir qui vous habite?", original French quote. Seminar VII is dedicated to ethics in the psychoanalytical field (Lacan, 1986).

## References


Deleuze, G. (1989), *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif*? Paris: Seuil.

Deleuze, G. (2020), *La soggettivazione. Corso su Michel Foucault (1985-1986)/3*. Verona: ombre corte.

De Luca Picione, R. (2020). La singolarità del «sinthomo» e la supplenza dei «Nomi-del-padre» nell'insegnamento di Jacques Lacan. L'Inconscio. Rivista Italiana di Filosofia e Psicoanalisi, 9, 60-88.

Demetrio, D. (2017), *La vita si cerca dentro di sé. Lessico Autobiografico*. Milano: Mimesis.

Fabbri, M. (2020), *La soggettivazione nel tempo del nichilismo: dialettica fra liberal e comunitari, narrazioni e contro narrazioni*. In G. Annacontini & M. Pesare (Eds.), *Costruire Esistenze. Soggettivazione e tecnologie formative del sé*. Milano: Mimesis (pp. 103-119).

Foucault, M. (1988), *Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault.* Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusets Press.

Foucault, M. (2009), *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II. Cours au Collége de France 1983-1984*. Paris: Gallimard-Seuil.

Gennari, M. (2014), *Storia della Bildung.* Brescia: La Scuola.

Lacan, J. (1966), *Ecrits.* Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J., (1976), Le sinthome. *Ornicar? Revue du champ freudien. 6.* Séance du 18 novembre 1975. Paris.

Lacan, J., (1986), *Le Séminaire, Livre VII. L'éthique de la psychanalyse*. Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (2001), *Autres écrits*, Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (2005), *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIII. Le sinthome*. Paris: Seuil.

Massa, R. (1992), *La clinica della formazione: un'esperienza di ricerca*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Mortari, L. (2020), *Gemme di senso nel cammino dell'anima*. In G. Annacontini & M. Pesare (Eds.), *Costruire Esistenze. Soggettivazione e tecnologie formative del sé*. Milano: Mimesis (pp. 24-47).

Orsenigo J., & Ulivieri Stiozzi S. (2018), La Clinica della formazione in Italia. *Cliopsy. Clinique d'orientation psychanalytique dans le champ de l'éducation et de la formation, 20,* 23-37.

Pesare, M. (2015), *Per una psicopedagogia del soggetto di indirizzo lacaniano*. In M. Tomarchio & S. Ulivieri Stiozzi (Eds.), *Pedagogia militante. Diritti, culture, territori*. Pisa: ETS (pp. 639-646).

Pesare, M. (2017), *Il soggetto barrato. Per una psicopedagogia di orientamento lacaniano*. Milano: Mimesis.

Riva, M.G. (2000), *Studio clinico sulla formazione.* Milano*:* Franco Angeli, Milano.

Riva, M.G. (2004), *Il lavoro pedagogico come ricerca dei significati e ascolto delle emozioni.* Milano: Guerini Scientifica.

Semeraro, A. (2007), *Pedagogia e Comunicazione. Paradigmi e intersezioni*. Roma: Carocci.

Sola, G. (2003), *Umbildung. La 'trasformazione' nella formazione dell'uomo*. Milano: Bompiani.

Žižek, S. (1989), *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London-New York: Verso.

Žižek, S. (2005), *Foreword: they moved the Underground*. In A. Monroe (Ed.), *Interrogation machine: Laibach and NSK*, Cambridge-London: MIT Press (p. XIII).