PSYCHOANALYTIC REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE DISTORTION AND EMPATHIC LISTENING

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The evocative psychoanalytic revisions of Jacques Marie Emile Lacan (1901–81), amid a flurry of controversies regarding its clinical, literary, and even intellectual relevance, have brought increased attention to the signification and listening processes that transpire between psychoanalyst and patient. This has come about largely through renewed focus on the role of language and distortions of language within the psychotherapeutic relational process, in addition to the larger thematic- and content-related foci that have generally occupied psychoanalysts’ attention.

I have elsewhere attempted to elucidate the role of language distortion, bearing particularly upon Lacan’s notion of the castration or the “symbolic wounding” of the Word (1956a/1977, p. 65; 1956b, p. 269), in the case of a Hebrew-speaking obsessional schizoid patient who, in a kind of private language, masculinized the feminine-gender second-person pronouns and certain nouns (Spero, 1990). Here I would like to deepen the analysis and elucidate some Lacanian and post-Lacanian contributions to the listening process and its linguistic underpinnings, illustrated by a microevent drawn from the reaction of a therapist (and the supervisor) to a linguistic-relational impression created by a Hebrew-speaking psychotic patient. As such, I have directed my observations not primarily at the eve of the patient’s psychopathology—for, as will be evident, the patient herself does not directly introduce an error in language—but rather at the level of the listening process of the therapist. The inferences to be presented admittedly draw upon clinical intuition a bit more heavily than I would prefer, although I offer whatever confirmatory trends have been permitted by the circumstances of the treatment. On the whole, the material will enable a reconsideration of the empathic listening process in the light of the stimulating theses of Jacques Lacan.

THE ARCHITECTONICS OF LANGUAGE

By way of preface, one notes that the subtle nuances of the architectonic structure of language, in addition to its contents and metaphorical values,
are receiving increasingly more attention in contemporary psychoanalytic literature (Edelson, 1975; Turkle, 1982). On the other hand, the linkage between ego functioning, quality of object relations, and linguistic structure is not a new concept (Rosen, 1966; Shapiro, 1979). Yet the current interest seems to have at least two novel impetuses. The first results from an interesting change in theoretical perspective that, as I see it, can be summarized as follows: It had previously been thought that the transitional object is the primary organizer of the psyche, but this view has been mitigated by new evidence that the mind actually begins to organize much earlier as it becomes anchored, sometimes pathologically, to a variety of objects or processes that precede the transitional period (see Gaddini, 1978; Ogden, 1989; Tustin, 1981). In turn, the incumbent primacy of all of these assorted kinds of precursor objects has now been balanced by the formative role of even earlier protorepresentations of interpersonal interaction—such as Daniel Stern’s “Representations of Interaction Generalized” (1985) and Christopher Bollas’s “transformational (process) object” (1987)—around which core self-structures begin to consolidate. (No doubt, even earlier precursors of the transitional object proper are bound to be discovered the further back object relations-oriented researchers date the formation of self [see Eagel, 1984, p. 23].)

This recent development has allowed for greater recognition of the role of linguistic structures themselves as early psychic anchoring devices, including the role these play in establishing the kind of intersubjective connectedness that is necessary for interpretation at certain critical moments during psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Relatively more broad concepts that had previously been used to explain the interpretive process, such as “empathic attunement,” “fusion,” or even the idea of the analyst’s “containment” of the patient’s projected representational states (see Giovacchini, 1990; Modell, 1990), can no longer be viewed by themselves as adequate or completely descriptive of the interpretive processes.

It is now more meaningful to speak in terms of early protorepresentations of signification, for want of a more handy cognomen, that eventually mature into the formal structures of language and more complex (or pathological) forms of object relations. These processes eventually subtend the structure of the linguistic conscious and the linguistic unconscious, and may be construed as “organizing attendants” to any other erstwhile primary anchoring object as well as to the manner and level in which such objects will be eventually internalized (see Weich, 1978). And these processes will play a similar, parallel role in the way in which the psychoanalyst’s working psychic structures take form, as well as the way the analyst internalizes his or her patient’s representations, creates a working representation of the patient during psychotherapy, and formulates interpretations.