Lacan’s Theory of Language

Part 3

The Gap in Lacanian Psychoanalysis, and Linguistics

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The place in question is the entrance to the cave, towards the exit of which Plato guides us...it is an entrance one can only reach just as it closes (the place will never be overrun with tourists), and the only way for it to open up a bit is by calling from the inside...This is not unsolvable, assuming the “open sesame” of the unconscious consists in having speech effects, the unconscious being linguistic in structure...What we have to account for is a gap...


1. POINT OF VIEW

Strategy is a matter of point of view. And bad strategy brings even the most heroic efforts to naught. So it is crucial in beginning anything to make sure you take the right point of view. So before I begin to look at the gap I will carefully frame my point of view.

Lacan was a purist in this regard: he always insisted on speaking about psychoanalysis from the psychoanalytic point of view. And he often argued and/or implied that it is wrong to look at psychoanalysis from any other point of view, mentioning as wrong specifically, for example, the points of view of physics, biology, psychology, and information theory. Likewise, although Freud was not in a position to be as explicit about this as Lacan, for reasons which I will explain below, he also insisted that one must look at psychoanalysis from the psychoanalytic point of view. So one of the most basic premises of psychoanalysis is that the only legitimate point of view to take in looking at psychoanalysis is the psychoanalytic point of view.

This premise situates psychoanalysis in fundamental conflict with the currently prevailing scientific point of view, because one of the latter’s fundamental premises is that all points of view can be reduced to the point of view of the science of physics. So the currently prevailing scientific point of view insists on looking at everything, including psychoanalysis, from the point of view of the science of physics.1

And this premise also situates psychoanalysis in fundamental conflict, in exactly the same way, with the currently prevailing conventional point of view, because the current conventional point of view also insists on looking at everything from the point of view of the science of physics.

Clearly this is not a coincidence. Psychoanalysis is opposed to both the conventional point of view and the prevailing scientific point of view because in regard to the premise at issue the conventional and scientific points of view are the same. Although this is contrary to conventional wisdom, it stands to reason and fact: Scientists begin as normal people, and so by the age of four or five, when they have learned to function in the symbolic medium of exchange, i.e., in language, they will have adopted the world view that will dominate them for the rest of their lives, which is the normal, conventional world view. So when they get older and begin to become scientists, they begin with the conventional world view. Thus the evolution of science, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically, is a process of progressively discovering and getting rid of conventional premises that are false. And from this it follows that the prevailing scientific point of view should properly be called the conventional scientific point of view, at least in regard to the premise at issue here.

So the psychoanalytic point of view is fundamentally constituted in opposition to the conventional point of view (which includes the conventional scientific point of view). I will show below that both Freud and Lacan framed this fundamental opposition as a function of the gap. This brings us to the main purpose of this paper, which is to
focus attention upon and clarify this much misunderstood gap, and its pivotal role in framing the psychoanalytic point of view as opposed to the conventional point of view. I will show that the Freudian revolution turns on the gap.

Now, I will situate my point of view in relation to this framework of opposition. I will be speaking about the gap in psychoanalysis here, but in apparent conflict with the basic premise of psychoanalysis as set forth above, I will not be looking at it from the psychoanalytic point of view. Nor will I be looking at it from the conventional point of view. I will be looking at the gap from the linguistic point of view; not the conventional linguistic point of view, but the Lacanian linguistic point of view. Let me explain.

One must distinguish between two different linguistic points of view. When I say “the linguistic point of view” without any qualifying adjectives, one would normally think I am talking about the point of view that currently dominates the linguistic universe of discourse, the point of view that is preeminently typified by Noam Chomsky’s theory of language. This theory of language, or point of view, has come to dominate the linguistic universe of discourse so much that it is commonly considered to be the one and only possible theory of language, and is commonly considered to be the most natural theory of language. It is regarded in this way, I suggest, because it shares almost all of the premises of the prevailing scientific point of view, notably the premise that all other points of view are reducible to that of physics. In other words, Chomsky’s basic premise is that language is a function of physics. Thus Chomsky’s theory, which is the point of view that currently dominates the linguistic universe of discourse, can correctly be characterized as the conventional linguistic point of view. It is a subuniverse of the conventional scientific point of view, which is a subuniverse of the conventional point of view. And this explains why this point of view has come to be adopted and thought of as the linguistic point of view: it seems to be the linguistic point of view to the conventional mind because it is the one that is implicitly presupposed by the conventional point of view. So Chomskyian linguistic theory is in this sense the conventional linguistic theory. It is what anthropologists would call “a folk theory.”

And so there must be another linguistic point of view, i.e., a truly scientific linguistic point of view, which would, of course, be in opposition to the conventional linguistic folk theory. And as a matter of fact the history of the science of linguistics, since its very inception around the turn of the century, has been a struggle against the force of conventionality, a struggle to differentiate a truly objective scientific linguistic point of view from the prevailing conventional folk linguistic theory. This other point of view is what Saussure and Sapir and Jakobson and the other founders of the science of linguistics were striving to attain. This other linguistic point of view is the one I will take here. And, I suggest, it is the same as the Lacanian psychoanalytic point of view. We can represent this situation, this matrix of alignments and oppositions in point of view, as in Table 1.

Table 1 The Framework of Point of View

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Psychoanalytic Point of View</th>
<th>The Conventional Point of View</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Truly Scientific Point of View</td>
<td>The Conventional Scientific Point of View</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Truly Scientific Linguistic Point of View</td>
<td>The Conventional Linguistic Point of View</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

While this is a perfectly accurate characterization of the situation, as far as it goes, and I will flesh it out more as the discussion unfolds, there remains the question of how and why Lacan came to think of the psychoanalytic and the linguistic points of view as the same. So let me address that question.

The psychoanalytic point of view was, of course, discovered by Freud. And he was a medical doctor, so it was only natural that he would develop his ideas in terms of the language of medicine, which is basically the language of biology. However, in spite of the fact that he developed his discovery in the language of biology, he did not think of psychoanalysis as a subdivision of biology. As he said (SE XV, 21),

"...psycho-analysis must keep itself free from any hypothesis that is alien to it, whether of an anatomical, chemical, or physiological kind, and must operate entirely with purely psychological auxiliary ideas..."

Thus, although Freud used biological words, or rather, because he used biological words, he had to struggle from the beginning to distinguish psychoanalytic concepts from their biological counterparts, e.g., desire from need, drive from instinct, networks of associations from networks of nerves. From the beginning Freud insisted that psychoanalytic phenomena do not belong to the realm of biology, but he was unable to say to what realm they do belong, for a reason which we now know, and to which we will come shortly.

So Freud used the language of biology merely as an expedient. He piggy-backed psychoanalytic theory on biological theory by using biological terminology metaphorically. And when biological metaphors proved to be inadequate, he did not hesitate to resort to other conceptual contrivances that have no relation to biology at all, such as jokes, or allegories, or ancient Greek myths, or if necessary he made up his own myths. In this way,
psychoanalytic theory, which had pretensions of being scientific, came to be framed in a very unscientific style of language, as a kind of masquerade of biology. Unfortunately figurative language, and masquerade, is confusing and off-putting to the scientific mind. That is, to the conventional scientific mind. And, as we will see, this includes most psychologists and psychiatrists, as well as many, if not most, psychoanalysts. So from the beginning the psychoanalytic discourse has been framed in an extraordinarily confusing type of language.

This was the state of the psychoanalytic discourse when Lacan entered into it. The first and most fundamental contribution Lacan made to our understanding of psychoanalysis, and thus to our understanding of the human situation in general, is that he figured out what was wrong with Freud’s point of view. He realized that Freud had been driven to such make-shift contrivances in language, such terminological frauds, because the scientific framework that Freud needed as the basis for the theory of psychoanalysis was not the science of biology, but the science of linguistics, and the science of linguistics had not yet been developed when Freud began to frame the psychoanalytic universe of discourse. This is why, although Freud was certain from the beginning that psychoanalytic phenomena do not belong to the science of biology, he could not have known that they do belong to the science of linguistics. So Freud did the best he could with metaphors and myths, and he made amazing progress considering the awkwardness of the language that he had to use.

So what Lacan did was to translate and transform Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis from the language of biological metaphor and myth into the language of linguistic theory. He reinterpreted and modified Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis over the years, little by little, so that it gradually became Lacan’s theory of psychoanalysis, now framed in the language of linguistics. Freud’s drives became signifiers, repression became ellipsis, the Oedipus complex became the logic of the symbol, and the myth of the primal horde became the logic of the pronoun system, etc.

And in the course of this process, Lacan also modified the theory of language he was positing as the foundation underlying psychoanalytic theory. At first Lacan assumed Saussure’s theory of language, and then he modified it as needed, little by little, under the influence of Lévi-Strauss, Benveniste, Jacobson, Peirce, and others, so that it gradually became Lacan’s theory of language.

So as Lacan was explicitly developing his theory of psychoanalysis, for which he is famous, he was at the same time implicitly developing his own underlying theory of language, which has been almost totally ignored. In fact, Lacan explained psychopathology and its treatment as a function of language. So at bottom what Lacan did was develop a theory of language which is robust enough to explain the facts of language, and to explain human psychopathology, and to govern the treatment of psychopathology by means of the psychoanalytic discourse. So Lacan’s theory of psychoanalysis is a theory of language, and his theory of language is a theory of psychoanalysis.

Of course, the fact that the two have become one in Lacan’s discourse does not mean that they have become one in the general intellectual universe of discourse. The discourse of psychoanalysis and the discourse of linguistics have historically been and still continue for the most part to be separate subuniverses in the bureaucracy of academia. In fact, the two are even different in certain ways Lacan’s own discourse. His theory of psychoanalysis is explicit, whereas his theory of language is only implicit. Also one might say that the theory of psychoanalysis is more practical, being governed by its praxis in real face to face encounter, whereas the theory of language is more purely theoretical. But for Lacan, and for us, these differences are adventitious. There is no gap between them.

On the contrary, as I will try to make clear below, both Lacan’s theory of language and his theory of psychoanalysis relate to the gap in the same way: they center on the gap. And this is precisely what distinguishes the psychoanalytic point of view from the conventional point of view, because ignorance of the gaps is the very ground of the conventional. That is what Lacan meant by saying that ignorance is the first mode of desire.

In sum then, the theory of psychoanalysis and the theory of language may be historically and bureaucratically different, but in Lacan’s theory of psychoanalysis is a theory of language. As seen from the outside, i.e., from the conventional point of view, they are different, but as seen from inside the psychoanalytic point of view they are the same. So one can look at psychoanalysis from the linguistic point of view, and be both an insider and an outsider. And vice versa. Here will be looking at the gap in Lacanian psychoanalysis from the linguistic point of view, the Lacanian linguistic point of view.

2. THE LOGIC OF THE GAP, ACCORDING TO FREUD

Up to this point I have not defined the gap. As a matter of fact, due to the elusive nature of the gap, which will become more evident as the discussion unfolds, it is very difficult to define the gap. I have given a precise definition of the gap in a forthcoming work, *Lacan’s Theory of Language*, but that is of no use here. So as an
expository expedient I will define the gap here in terms of the logic of censorship, which was one of Freud’s favorite ways of talking about the gap (e.g., SE XV, 139-141).

First, let us fine tune the focus of our attention as we begin to look at the gap in psychoanalysis. The basic idea of a gap is simple enough: it is an interruption or a space in something. So the obvious question to ask about the gap in psychoanalysis is this: What is it a gap in? When you look around, you see gaps everywhere. A window is a gap in a wall. The Grand Canyon is a gap in a plateau. The Wife of Bath had a gap in her teeth. There is the gap between rich and poor. Etc. The world is full of gaps. But psychoanalysis is not interested in all types of gaps. One way we can define the focus of psychoanalysis is in terms of the basic paradigm of Lacan’s theory, which consists of the three categories of phenomena—the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. Given this we can say that psychoanalysis focuses on gaps in the symbolic, as distinct from gaps in the imaginary or the real. Or in other words, since Lacan’s symbolic is the realm of language proper, psychoanalysis focuses upon gaps in language.

And the fact that Freud characterized the gap in terms of censorship leads us to the same view. Censorship is something that you do to language. As I will explain in detail below, censorship produces a gap in a body of language, in a symbolic body. These are the types of gaps that psychoanalysis focuses upon. As Lacan said (Seminar XI, p. 25): “Impediment, failure, split. In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles. Freud is attracted by these phenomena…” So according to both Freud and Lacan, psychoanalysis focuses upon gaps in language. Psychoanalysis is not about biology, but about language, specifically, gaps in language. Henceforth we will focus on gaps in language.

Second, it is important to bear in mind that the gap is not an ordinary type of thing, like a duck or a tree. Indeed, it is not a thing at all, at least not in the ordinary sense. It is an event, or rather a sequence of events. It has an essentially diphasic character: First there is an opening and then a closing. So the gap has a time dimension. So one must think of the gap not only as an object or a state, but also as a sequence of events, linguistic events. In other words, the gap is a sequence of speech acts. Thus the gap has the logic of a discourse. The gap is a discourse.

Now I will explain the diphasic logic of the gap in terms of the idea of censorship. And I will show how Freud framed the logic of the gap in terms of three moments, two “positive” moments separated by and mediated by a negative moment.

In order to simplify the discussion here, we will think of censorship, as Freud did, in terms of an act performed by an agent of the government in relation to a printed text, such as, for example, a newspaper. The logic of the gap begins with a text, one that has been written out, and printed, and ready for publication, but not yet distributed to the public. So at this point there is a split in the situation, in the social fabric, in the body politic, in regard to knowledge of the text: there is the private point of view of the author, who knows the text, as opposed to the point of view of the public, who does not yet know. (This is the epistemological dimension of the split in ego, which we will come to below.) Then, before publication, the text is sent to the department of censorship. That agency reviews the text and cuts out any part of the text that is inconsistent with or prohibited by government policy. This produces a gap both in the paper itself (Lacan’s real) and in the text (Lacan’s symbolic and imaginary). In other words, the gap consists of an actual hole in the paper and at the same time, on another level of analysis, a hole in the text that is printed on the paper. Then the newspaper with a gap in it is distributed to the public. This is the basic logic of the gap.

However, in real speech acts the gap is not generally permitted to appear as a naked hole in the text. It would be too obvious, too embarrassing, because a naked gap is charged with the very force and value of the forbidden words that had been cut from the text. Furthermore, even when a gap can be reduced to an invisible nothing, as in an oral speech act, a gap cannot generally be permitted in the surface, because it might render the speech act ungrammatical and perhaps uninterpretable. If and when how a particular gap might be covered up is a complex matter, but it is not a matter of chance; there are general principles that govern the covering up of the gaps. And this leads us to the realization that there is a whole new branch of linguistics whose purpose is to study the covering up of the gaps and to discover the principles governing the covering up of the gaps. For example, although we cannot go into it here, it is obvious that a gap at the end of a structure is generally more tolerable than a gap in the middle of a structure. Consider the gap in the following sentence, which was spoken by a respectable elderly woman recounting a dream, discussed by Freud (SE XV, 137) as an example of censorship. (Freud explains how you can determine from the context that what has been cut out is “perform love service (with).”)

*It must never happen that an elderly woman ... mumble ... a mere boy.*

In principle one could reduce this gap to nothing, in which case the sentence would become, “It must never happen that an elderly woman a boy,” but this is ungrammatical and unintelligible. Of course, one could replace the forbidden and excised text with a vague verbal expression such as “do something like that to”, but one cannot reduce the gap to nothing. One must at least mark the gap as a gap, as here, with an audible mumble.
So the cutting out of the prohibited part of the text does not end the logic of the gap: it is just the beginning. The gap mediates between the original author of the text and the reader of the text, so we can trace the two main vectors of the chain of implications in terms of these two parties. Focusing first on the reader, when he looks at the newspaper, not only can he see the gaps, but the gaps stand out with greater prominence than the remaining text. The gaps are the most striking part of the text. So, while the words that have been cut out are no longer there to convey the message they were intended to convey, the gaps remain as traces, or marks of the missing words. Thus the gaps convey by inversion something of the original message. And the gaps also convey another message, a second-order message.

The second-order message is this. A gap says of the something that it represents by inversion that the government considers that something to be a threat to its power and authority. The gap says, “What has been cut out here is the key to liberation from this government.” Thus someone who wants to become free of that form of government will ignore the text and focus on the gaps. And this is why, as Lacan said, “Freud is attracted by these phenomena.” The gaps are shadowy signs pointing to the exit from Plato’s cave.

Now consider the implications of the gap for the author of the text. For a variety of reasons, an author does not want his text to be censured. He particularly does not want it to appear in public full of gaps. Apart from aesthetics, if a particular author persists in trying to publish texts that are offensive to the government, the government will eventually decide that it is easier to eliminate the author than to keep having to eliminate portions of his texts. Thus in order to avoid conflict with the government, in order to avoid becoming a gap himself, in order to appear to be a good citizen, an author is motivated to try to anticipate what might be offensive to the government and will edit his own texts accordingly. In short, censorship leads to self-censorship.

There are many different strategies an author can adopt in exercising self-censorship. The most extreme form of censorship, is for the author to not write anything at all about the topics that offend the government. Obviously this extreme form of the gap could not possibly leave traces in the immediate context, because there is no immediate context. But even such extreme censorship does leave distant traces, mostly in the form of what Freud called displacement: the form of what is forbidden leaves no traces, but the energy of what is forbidden is displaced onto something else that is permitted. So if something that is actually uninteresting and unimportant is invested with an inappropriate degree of energy, that is a sign of censorship elsewhere.

Or one can write about a forbidden topic, but do so in an oblique manner. One can disguise it in a form that appears to be innocent. For example, one can clothe a forbidden statement in the form of the opposite. If the author wanted to chastise the king for a particularly stupid act, the author could anticipate that his text would be censured, and perhaps that he would be sent to jail, or put to death. So the author could replace chastisement with praise, hoping that the censor would take it at face value as praise, and therefore allow it to be published, but hoping that the public would read between the lines and “get” the underlying, hidden message. Thus, instead of writing, “The king is stupid,” he could write, “The king is brilliant.”

In consequence, a sentence such as, “The king is brilliant,” can be read two ways. It could be read as an ordinary straightforward sentence, meaning what it appears to mean. Or it could be read as a sentence whose predicate has been cut out, producing a gap, which is then covered up and disguised as the opposite. Thus the sentence, “The king is brilliant,” is intrinsically ambiguous. And yet, here too, there is no overt sign of the gap in the surface of the text. But nevertheless, in one reading of the sentence, “The king is brilliant,” or any sentence expressing praise, what might be called the paranoid reading, there is an invisible gap under the surface of the sentence, and under the gap is the censored text, which is the intended message, and for which the opposite substitutes in the surface.

These few examples make it clear that the chain of implication that is set in motion by the cut can go on and on at great length. Even so, one can characterize the logic of the gap, following Freud, in terms of three evolutionary stages. First, there is the original text. Second, some part of the original text is cut out, which creates a gap in the text. And third, the gap is covered up or filled with something else, perhaps a mumble, perhaps a generic expression (such as “doing it”), or perhaps a cleverly disguised substitute that alludes to the original text through a long chain of associations. We can succinctly represent the three stages in the logic of the gap as in Table 2 using the same tabular format that was used by Freud for this purpose in a letter to his friend Fliess (Letter 46, May 30, 1896, SE 1:229-230). Here, then, we have the basic logic of the gap.
This paradigm raises many questions, but I can only briefly touch on a few points here. First, let me show how this paradigm can be used to analyze a specific gap. Depending on what aspect of the situation one wants to focus on, one can look at a text from different points of view, and these are not mutually exclusive. For example, one can focus on the stages in the evolution of the form of the sentence, as if one were to look at the censored newspaper at three points in time. Using the example cited above, these three stages might be represented by turning the table sideways as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The original text</td>
<td>The gap</td>
<td>A substitute text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stage 1. It must never happen that an elderly woman performs love service with a mere boy.

Stage 2. It must never happen that an elderly woman [the gap] a mere boy.

Stage 3. It must never happen that an elderly woman mumble a mere boy.

Or, one can look at the evolution of the gap in terms of a discourse between the three parties involved—the author, the public, and the censor. (I, you, him) With the example at hand one might analyze the underlying discourse as below. This is just intended as an illustration of the logic of the gap. The discourse that take place between the author and the censor in negotiating a satisfactory compromise, the shaded zone, can be much more complex than this. Indeed, it is commonly repeated with variations, like a fugue, over a period of years. Indeed, it never comes to an end, because such a compromise is never satisfactory.

1. Author to Censor I want to say: It must never happen that an elderly woman performs love service with a mere boy
2. Censor to Author You can not say, “perform love service with”
   Author to Censor OK, then I will mumble that part
   Censor to Author OK.
3. Author to Public It must never happen that an elderly woman…mumble…a mere boy.

Second, note that I have shaded the gap. One might suppose that this is just an arbitrary way of representing the fact that the gap is of a different ontological order from the other two stages. But shading the gap is not arbitrary. Freud also shaded the gap in his representation of this paradigm in his letter to Fliess. And Lacan called the gap a “zone of shades” (Seminar XI p. 23) and a “shaded area” (127). So it appears that there is a sense in which it is natural to characterize the gap as shadowy. For one thing, as I said above, the gap is a negative type of thing; it has no being in itself, no embodiment, so it is manifest only as a shape that is entirely an epiphenomenal effect of other phenomena, i.e., like a shadow. Shades of Plato’s cave.

Third, note that in Table 2 I made the vertical line that represents the left boundary of Stage 2, the beginning of Stage 2, thicker than the other two boundaries. I did this to indicate that, just as the gap is a different type of phenomenon, so is this a different type of boundary. This boundary represents a cut, whereas the next boundary, the boundary between Stage 2 and Stage 3, represents a substitution. And, somewhat perplexingly, the first boundary, the boundary that marks the beginning of Stage 1, also represents a substitution.

This brings us to the fourth point. Stage 1 is not really the beginning or the first in any absolute sense; it is just relatively first. It is the first moment in the logic of the gap. It is the point of departure from which a substitutive displacement takes place. But if Stage 1 is a text, then it too is a substitutive displacement. Stage 1 is only first in the relative sense that it is prior to something else. But it is also second in relation to another something else. Nothing in language is first. Everything in language is substitutive in accord with the logic of this paradigm. This paradigm represents the logic of a link, which can be connected with other links to form a chain, and thus is derived the chain of substitutions which we call language. This paradigm represents the atomic element of language. You can add such atomic elements together, you can multiply and divide them, but you cannot break language down into any more primitive atomic elements.
The fifth and final note I will make on the paradigm of the gap is this. As we know, we can use the logic of this paradigm as an analytic tool to work backwards to uncover the layers of the evolution of any chunk of language. This is the method of psychoanalysis, and linguistics. And we know that if we keep digging, eventually we will come to the bottom, where we find something real, such as sound or marks on paper. And we also know that these real things are not analyzable in accord with the logic of the gap. This has led many to assume that this proves that the logic of the gap is only of limited usefulness. And this is true, it is only limited to the realm of language, because when you get down to the level of the real, then you are no longer in language. If you study sound or marks on paper, then you are no longer in the realm of linguistics, you are in the realm of physics. As Lacan said, there are no gaps in the real.

By way of concluding this presentation of the logic of the gap, and in order to round out the picture somewhat, I would like to mention three examples of general gaps, which might at first seem to be of a fundamentally different nature than the relatively concrete examples of the gap that have been cited so far. But they are basically the same.

The first example of a general gap is the gap in sexuality. It is a matter of common knowledge that Freud held that sexuality is central to the organization and dynamic of the human psyche, and that sexuality is thus central to his theory of the aetiology of psychopathology. Sexuality and psychopathology are related through the mechanism of Desire. Desire is the motive force in the human psyche, and desire is most prominently conceptualized as sexual desire.

But it is not a matter of common knowledge that when Freud talks about sexuality in human beings he is talking about a fundamentally different type of phenomenon from the sexuality of animals: sexuality in animals is purely biological, but sexuality in human beings is transformed as a function of the gap. Freud holds that there is a systematic gap in the ontogenetic development of sexuality in the human animal, and that this gap is central to the organization of the human psyche, and thus to the aetiology of human psychopathology. As he put it in “An Outline of Psycho-Analysis” (SE XXIII, 153), “…the onset of sexual life is diphasic, it occurs in two waves…” (Emphasis in original). He spells it out more fully thus.

*It has been found that in early childhood there are signs of bodily activity to which only an ancient prejudice could deny the name of sexual and which are linked to psychical phenomena that we come across later in adult erotic life… It is further found that these phenomena which emerge in early childhood form part of an ordered course of development, that they pass through a regular process of increase, reaching a climax towards the end of the fifth year, after which there follows a lull. During this lull progress is at a standstill and much is unlearnt and there is much recession. After the end of this period of latency, as it is called, sexual life advances once more with puberty; we might say that it has a second efflorescence…It is not a matter of indifference that the events of this early period, except for a few residues, fall a victim to infantile amnesia. Our views on the aetiology of the neuroses and our technique of analytic therapy are derived from these conceptions.* (emphasis added)

Here he describes the gap between the two phases of sexual development as a “lull” or a “period of latency,” and he says that the first phase and the gap are obscured by the shadow of an “infantile amnesia.” Thus human sexuality develops in accord with the paradigm of the gap as in Table 1. Human sexuality turns on the gap.

Obviously I cannot explore here the many implications of the sexual gap for the theory of psychoanalysis, or for the theory of language. But I will comment on the following frequently misunderstood aspect of the sexual gap. I said above that psychoanalysis focuses on the type of gap that is found in language, but, since this is a gap in sexuality, many critics have supposed that the sexual gap must be a different type of gap, a gap in biology, a gap in the real. This is a misunderstanding that follows from taking the wrong point of view, the conventional point of view. To understand how Freud is thinking about this you have to realize that Freud is not talking about the biology of sexuality, but about the symbolization of sexuality. Freud is talking about the process by which the wildness of biological sexuality is symbolically colonized, symbolically civilized. Freud is talking about the development of a person’s conceptualization of his self in relation to his sexuality in the medium of language. So Freud would agree with C. S. Peirce as he put it in terms of his theory of signs (*Collected Papers*, 5.314).

...the word or sign which man uses is the man himself. For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an external sign, proves that man is an external sign...my language is the sum total of myself...

Speaking of self, this brings us to the second example of a general gap. Freud, like all of us, commonly talks about the self, or ego, or I, as if it were a coherent thing, like a potato or a duck. “But,” as he explains in “Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense” (SE XXIII, 275-278), “we are clearly at fault in this,” because the ego is an intrinsically split entity (if we can refer to an entity as split). The ego is a symbolic entity, a creature of language, and thus consists, like all elements of language, of two phases split by a gap. The first phase of ego is what Feud called “ld” and the second phase is what Feud called “superego.” And, of course, these are just the Latin
terms for the three personal pronouns, I, you, and it, which comprise the three elements of the tripartite matrix of person that is fundamental to every language.

And speaking of language, this brings us to the third general example. There is a systematic gap in the ontogeny of language that is isomorphic with, but earlier than, the gap in the ontogeny of sexuality. In *Lacan’s Theory of Language* I show that the three phases in the ontogeny of language, which I represent as in Table 3 below, were integral to the thinking of the renowned linguist Roman Jakobson, who had a profound influence on Lacan. I show that Jakobson explained these stages in child language development in detail in terms of numerous specific linguistic phenomena in his *Child Language, Aphasia, and Language Universals*.

Stage 1 is from birth to approximately two years. During this stage the normal child learns to interact with the world by means of a natural or wild type of language (these are Jakobson’s adjectives), which is more or less of his own creation, is more or less independent of the language of his parents, and is a radically different type of language from what we think of as language proper, i.e. the adult or civilized type of language. What I am calling wild language is what Freud called “primary processes,” and civilized language is Freud’s “secondary processes.” And these two types of language correspond to Lacan’s imaginary and symbolic respectively. The fundamental differences, as Freud explained, is there is no negative in wild language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wild Language</td>
<td>The gap</td>
<td>Civilized Language</td>
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Stage 2, and the transformation of Wild language into Civilized language, begins at two years of age, and is marked by a number of striking developments, which take place more or less simultaneously. The first striking development is that the child learns the negative. And then he energetically applies the negative to everything, including himself, which is why this stage is commonly known as “the terrible twos.” But he is not just being terrible, he is systematically developing the implications of the logic of negation. He is working his way through every element of his universe of discourse, through his entire body of knowledge, including his conceptualization of himself, transforming the whole system, including himself, from an element in the wild type of language into an element in the civilized type of language.

The second striking development is that, as a function of the negative, gaps begin to appear in the child’s language, in his competence, and in his conception of himself. Of course, he strives to cover the gaps up, but at the beginning of this stage the gaps appear in a wider variety of forms, and more nakedly than at any other time, because the child has not mastered the technology of cover up. But as he becomes more skillful, he will be more successful in covering up and disguising the gaps, so that when he masters the civilized mode of language, naked gaps will rarely appear on the surface. So in this early stage, the gaps are manifest in the grossest and most striking form. In the grossest form, some children are struck totally dumb. Usually this lasts only for a short time, but in some cases children are completely dumb for months, or even years, and then, for no apparent reason, they suddenly begin to speak as fluently as if they had been speaking the whole time. In most cases, however, the child is only struck partially dumb, perhaps only in certain words, or in certain phonemes (commonly known as “speech impediments”), or in certain stressful settings (e.g., stage fright). One common manifestation of the gap is in stuttering.

The third striking development that takes place at this point is that the concept of the independent subject properly speaking first appears. In other words, the child learns the first person pronoun. There is no first person pronoun in wild language. So prior to this stage a child conceives of himself as he is seen in the eyes of the primary other, the mother. Thus prior to this stage a child normally refers to himself in the third person using the terms his mother uses to refer to him. For example, a pre-gap child might say, “Bobby is hungry,” instead of “I am hungry.” But then, when the child applies the negative to his infantile concept of himself, to his binary identity, which Freud calls his narcissistic identity, his personal pronoun system and his conceptualization of himself undergoes a radical transformation, in the course of which he comes out divided into three parts, or agencies, which are indexed in terms of the familiar trinary system of pronouns that is found in all languages.

Thus we see that the logic of the gap is the logic of language. Or, the logic of language is the logic of the gap. And thus everything that is in language or is a function of language is marked by the logic of the gap. This “everything” includes not only the obvious gaps in the surface of language, such as slips of the tongue, but also every element of language, big and small. In short, it is not just that there are gaps in language, as if language were something that was there prior to the gap, but that language is itself a function of the gap. Language is a system that is structured in accord with the tripartite logic of the gap, and it is made up of gaps. Language is all gaps.
3. FREUD FRAMED PSYCHOANALYSIS AS A FUNCTION OF THE GAP

To those who are familiar with the psychoanalytic universe of discourse, it may seem strange to talk about psychoanalysis as a function of the gap, because, although the word “gap,” or cognate terms, such as “split” or “hole”, are frequently used in the psychoanalytic universe of discourse, the gap is rarely the topic of discussion, and it is even more rarely characterized as being a fundamental concept of psychoanalysis. (And the same can be said for linguistics, only more so.) Thus one who is familiar with psychoanalysis might think that the idea that the gap is a fundamental concept in psychoanalysis is a new innovation, introduced by Lacan, or by me. But I will show in this section that Freud took the gap as central to psychoanalysis from the beginning.

Nevertheless, the lack of attention paid to the gap in the psychoanalytic discourse is an important fact, because it testifies to one of the most salient characteristics of the gap, which is that the gap is a stealth concept. But to follow the implications of this fact one must bear in mind that the gap is a stealth concept only as seen from the conventional point of view. Conventional eyes and ears filter out the gaps. But from an objective point of view the gaps are obvious. Not just obvious, but striking. The gaps are not just empty spaces, but are highly charged dynamic phenomena. They are charged with the force of the path of liberation they seek to hide. And, as I explained above, this is precisely why Freud focused on the gap.

So the fact that the gap has been almost entirely excluded from the psychoanalytic universe of discourse should not be taken to mean that it is not a fundamental concept in psychoanalysis; it means rather that the psychoanalytic universe of discourse has been civilized. But the point of the psychoanalytic point of view is to seek the liberation of the wild, and the wild is manifest as gaps in the civilized.

I will cite three types of argument that lead to the conclusion that Freud considered the gap to be a fundamental concept of psychoanalysis from the beginning. The first is based on what Freud said. In many places Freud explicitly characterized psychoanalysis as opposed to the conventional point of view as a function of the gap. In Freud’s day, as today, the conventional point of view is based on a systematic ignorance of the discontinuities and irregularities, the gaps, in the conventional conceptualization of reality as represented in language. There are no gaps in reality (which is why we call it the universe), so the gaps in the conventional representation of reality betray the falsity of that representation. And so the conventional view of reality can only sustain an aura of verisimilitude by ignoring the gaps. In other words, the conventional representation of reality is sustained by pretending that it is reality, by pretending that what is represented is what is. So the essence of the verisimilitude of conventional reality is sustained by ignoring the gaps.

So too conventional physics and conventional biology seek continuity and ignore discontinuity. And conventional psychology follows the physical sciences in assuming that psychic phenomena are governed by the same laws that govern physical phenomena. And so conventional psychology tries to make sense of psychic phenomena by focusing on continuities, and relegating discontinuities to the background.

However, as Freud said in the following quotes from “An Outline of Psycho-Analysis,” his revolution against conventional psychology was framed by two premises: (1) the laws that govern psychic phenomena are not the same as the laws that govern physical phenomena, and (2) the preeminent data of the psychic sciences are not the continuities, but the discontinuities, the gaps.

Every science is based on observations and experiences arrived at through the medium of our psychical apparatus. But since our science has as its subject that apparatus itself, the analogy ends here. We make our observations through the medium of the same perceptual apparatus precisely with the help of the breaks in the sequence of ‘psychical’ events: we fill in what is omitted by making plausible inferences and translating it into conscious material.(XXIII, 159, first emphasis (bold) in original, last two emphasis (underlined) added)

…the conscious filling-in of the gaps… (160, emphasis added)

We have discovered technical methods of filling up the gaps in the phenomena of our consciousness, and we make use of those methods just as a physicist makes use of experiment. (196-7, emphasis added)

The second type of argument is based on what Freud chose to talk about. From the beginning Freud focused attention on and tried to explain gappy phenomena. He concerned himself with anything that was deviant or abnormal—dreams, slips of the tongue, forgetting, bungled acts, jokes, etc., not to mention his main concern, which was psychopathic symptoms, about which he said this:

Wherever there is a symptom there is also an amnesia, a gap in the memory, and filling up this gap implies the removal of the conditions which led to the production of the symptom. (SE XI, 20, emphasis added)

Here we can see the logic of psychoanalysis in a nutshell: the gap causes psychopathology, and so filling in the gap is the cure.
The third type of argument follows from the absolutely fundamental position Freud attributed to repression: “The theory of repression is the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests.” (SE XIV, 16) Now, repression is merely a hypothecated psychological process; it is only manifest in reality as a gap in language. So if repression is the mental process by which the coinage of the human psyche is struck, then the gap is the coin itself. Repression and the gap are just different aspects of the same phenomenon. They are related as the act of cutting a piece of fabric and the cut that appears in the fabric, as verb and noun of the same root, as “to cut” and “a cut.” Thus it follows that, if repression is the cornerstone of psychoanalysis, then the gap is the embodiment of the cornerstone.

The integral relation between repression and the gap is spelled out in Freud’s argument for the assumption that there is an unconscious sector of the human psyche (SE XIV, 166).

We have learnt from psycho-analysis that the essence of the process of repression lies, not in putting an end to, annihilating, the idea which represents an instinct, but in preventing it from becoming conscious. When this happens we say of the idea that it is in a state of being ‘unconscious’, and we can produce good evidence to show that even when it is unconscious it can produce effects, even including some which finally reach consciousness.

Our right to assume the existence of something mental that is unconscious and to employ that assumption for the purpose of scientific work is disputed in many quarters. To this we can reply that our assumption of the unconscious is necessary and legitimate, and that we possess numerous proofs of its existence.

It is necessary because the data of consciousness have a very large number of gaps in them…(Emphasis added)

Repression cuts, and the cuts of repression are manifest as gaps in the fabric of language. Or rather, the gaps are the fabric of language. So language is the institutionalization of the cuts of repression in the form of gaps. As Wilden (126) put it in describing Freud’s thinking, “Repression produces a conscious discourse full of holes (lückenhaft).”

4. LACAN ALSO FRAMED PSYCHOANALYSIS AS A FUNCTION OF THE GAP

In a moment I will explain how Lacan framed psychoanalysis as a function of the gap. But first let me point out that it is remarkable that this should have to be explained at all. Lacan was much more explicit about the centrality of the gap than Freud. From the beginning and throughout his writings Lacan constantly emphasized the importance of the gap, which he talked about in terms of castration, cuts, joints, cuts, interruption, brief sessions, etc. (e.g. Seminar I, p. 2, 52, 69-70, 247). And Seminar XI is devoted to an explanation of the fundamentals of psychoanalysis as a function of the gap. Thus Lacan makes it abundantly clear that the gap is fundamental to psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, the disciples of Lacan have almost without exception failed to notice it. So the point is that, in addition to being crucial for understanding psychoanalysis, and linguistics, Lacan’s framing of psychoanalysis as a function of the gap, as he does explicitly in Seminar XI, is one of the most striking illustrations of the stealthy nature of the gap.

Let us now turn to see how Lacan frames psychoanalysis as a function of the gap in Seminar XI. Lacan begins by establishing his own position in the psychoanalytic universe of discourse as a function of the gap. In Chapter 1 he characterizes himself as one who has just been excommunicated from, excluded from, censured by, the orthodox psychoanalytic universe of discourse. Thus he himself is a gap in the fabric of psychoanalytic orthodoxy.

And then speaking as a gap, the first thing he does in Chapter 2 is to introduce the concept of the gap, which he does in a somewhat vague and mysterious manner, using that very name, “the gap” (or at least that is the name that is used in the English translation). And then he proceeds to use the gap as a way of introducing The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis, which is the title of this seminar. The four concepts he names as fundamental, and which he introduces as a function of the gap, are the unconscious, repetition, transference, and the drive. So, as you can see, although the gap is the first and most fundamental concept, Lacan does not name it as such, nor does he count it. Perhaps this indicates that he regards the gap as a kind of proto-concept, so fundamental that it is prior to and frames the psychoanalytic universe of discourse. As such the gap is to psychoanalysis as the father is to the human personality. The gap interrupts, the father interrupts, speech interrupts.

But in any case, it is clear that Lacan is not innocent of the subversion, because he uses the gap as his most fundamental concept, but he conspires to allow it to remain unnamed and uncounted, and thus to evade official conventional legitimacy. And he also contributes to the subversion in many other ways throughout the seminar. For example, he uses many different names to refer to the gap in this seminar, such as excommunication, cut, breach, discontinuity, rupture, split, slash, hole, stroke, slash, failure, impediment, stumble, slip, fracture, bi-partition, ditch (p. 62), self-mutilation, bar, etc., thereby obscuring the ubiquity of the gap. So, although the gap is the dominant and recurring theme of this seminar, it does not appear to be so on the surface.
In passing I would like to mention another very interesting, but seemingly accidental, way in which the gap fades from view in this seminar. The word “gap” is used many times in Seminar XI, so you might expect to find it listed in the index. And you will. In the index it says, “gap, see under unconscious.” But when you look under “unconscious,” the gap is not there. So in keeping with its elusive nature the gap appears in the index, but then it disappears under the unconscious.

Returning to follow Lacan’s introduction of the gap, in the course of introducing the concept of the gap he develops the three-stage logic of the gap as follows. First, he posits a certain “field,” by which he means a type of language. This field is there prior to the gap and prior to language proper. He says (p. 20) that his dictum, “the unconscious is structured like a language,”...refers to a field...that is explored, structured, elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, and which he has pinpointed in the title of his book, La Pensée Sauvage.

In my forthcoming work, Lacan’s Theory of Language, I explain in detail that this field is the semiotic system that I call “wild language,” the position of which in the paradigm of the gap is represented in Table 3 above. Now, just to make it clear that Table 3 accurately represents Lacan’s thinking as to the situation of this wild type of language, let us see how Lacan situates the field of wild language in relation to some other familiar points of reference. Lacan says quite forcefully, by means of a series of parallel forms (p. 20), that wild language is before any experience, before human relations, before the human subject:

before any experience, before any individual deduction, even before those collective experiences that may be related only to social needs are inscribed in it, something organizes this field

before strictly human relations are established

before any formation of the subject...in a presubjective way

He says wild language is a system of “relations that have already been determined... taken from whatever nature may offer as supports, supports that are arranged in themes of opposition.” In one place he equates wild language with the binary logic of yin/yang, the basic dialectic of Taoism (p. 151). He says, “Nature provides—I must use the word—signifiers, and these signifiers organize human relations in a creative way, providing them with structures and shaping them.” So, wild language is given by nature, by the nature of semiosis specifically, and it is prior to the strictly human, conventional type of language.

One might wonder then, is the unconscious the same as wild language? Lacan says, No: “The unconscious, the Freudian concept, is something different...” Wild language is “beneath the term unconscious.” So when Lacan says that “the unconscious is structured like a language” he does not mean that the unconscious is wild language. He means that the unconscious is a function of the gap, but it is structured like wild language. So, just as the law of gravity governs the physical world, wild language governs the unconscious.

It is at this point (beginning on p. 21) that he introduces the gap. But he does not say exactly how the gap is related to wild language. He begins by speaking vaguely about the mystery of dynamics and then begins to drift into a discussion of the gap in relation to Kant’s analysis of the concept of cause. Lacan says that there is a mysterious correlation between cause and the gap: “Whenever we speak of cause,” there is some sort of a gap.

But in any case, in as much as Lacan introduces the gap after he introduces wild language in the text, in the absence of explicit indications to the contrary, we can assume that he intends to convey the idea that the gap comes after wild language. So I take Lacan as intending to convey the notion that the gap is conceptually subsequent to wild language, and what is more, that the gap is at first a gap in wild language (the imaginary gap), and only secondarily a gap in civilized language (the symbolic gap).

It is at this point, after Lacan introduces wild language and the gap, that he begins to explain the first fundamental concept, the unconscious. And he explains it as a function of wild language and the gap. We saw above that Lacan says the unconscious is structured in accord with the laws of wild language. In other words, the unconscious belongs to and is governed by wild language. And he says (p. 25), “Discontinuity, then, is the essential form in which the unconscious first appears to us as a phenomenon.” Discontinuity is, of course, another name for the gap. And even more explicitly, in beginning his next lecture, Chapter 3 in the text (p. 29), Lacan characterizes the previous lecture, Chapter 2, as “my introduction of the unconscious through the structure of a gap.” And then he goes on to define the other three fundamental concepts as a function of the gap.

Thus we see that although the gap is not even named or counted as one of the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, it is in fact more fundamental than the four fundamental concepts. So the gap is an absolutely fundamental concept in psychoanalysis, and in linguistics.
Endnotes

1 Or from the point of view of the science of biology (which amounts to the same thing, since it is assumed that biology can be reduced to physics), or from the point of view of the science of psychology (which can be reduced to that of biology, which can be reduced to that of physics), etc.

2 Ignorance here does not mean “not knowing,” but “pretending not to know.” For example, “He ignored X,” does not mean that he did not know X, but that he acted as if he did not know X. So ignorance actually presupposes knowledge.

3 In Buddhist terminology this system of chain reactions is called samsara.

4 There is an asymmetry here that has profound implications for linguistic theory: “The king is stupid” is not as likely to be taken as a disguised way of saying “The king is brilliant.” This is an example of the general asymmetry in language as between the negative and positive. In other words, as has been frequently observed, irony and sarcasm convey a negative judgement, and there is no positive counterpart to these modes of speech. So there is a paranoid reading of the good, but no corresponding “innocent” reading of the bad. This is because the good is unmarked. And thus language is essentially a paranoid mode of interaction.

5 One might object to my reasoning thus: if this innocent sentence is subject to the paranoid reading, then every sentence is subject to a paranoid reading. But this is not an objection to my reasoning, because it is the point I am trying to make. If you follow the implications of the gap to the end, you are forced to the conclusion that language is all gaps. Every symbolic entity is a gap. Every element of language is a substitute for something else. Nothing in language is just what it is. Hence the paranoid aura of language. In fact, if something is taken as what it is, then it is not being taken symbolically. In this case language is outside of language.

6 One must distinguish between negativity and the negative. Negativity is the wild ancestor of, but is semiotically very different from, the negative. Negativity refers to behavior that has negative implications, such as turning away from or spitting out food. The negative is a word. In English, “No.” All animals, including children up to the age of two, even plants, engage in negative behavior, but they do not say “No.” What happens to the child at the age of two is that he learns the negative. The negative is what generates the gap. And the negative is the third element, which, when added to identity and conjunction, constitutes the symbolic type of logic, which is the logic of the civilized type of language, as distinct from the two element logic of wild language.

7 A little known fact about stuttering, which takes on profound implications in the context of psychoanalysis, with its focus on the Oedipus complex, and the castration complex, is that stuttering is almost exclusively a pathology of boys. So it is not surprising that the word that is most frequently stuttered is “mother.”

8 The gap is the coin of which language consists.
The only exception of which I am aware is Jacques-Alain Miller. In his commentary on Seminar XI (1995, p. 9) he says, for example, “Lacan privileges the gaps. He chooses to define the unconscious...as ‘impediment, failure, split.’ Here he is very close to Freud’s first discovery...” i.e. the gap. And he says “this strange inversion of values,” which is a function of the gap, “is the cornerstone of analytic experience” (13).

I am convinced that Lacan was profoundly influenced by Buddhism, though there is only circumstantial evidence of this. Perhaps it is a coincidence that the gap is also a fundamental concept of Buddhism. Three points.

First, meditation is the heart of the Buddhist mode of psychotherapy. And there are two fundamental elements in the Buddhist way of meditation—position (or posture) and focus. Everyone has seen a representation of the prescribed position. It is the focus that it relevant here: one focuses attention on one’s breath, especially on the gaps between the two phases of breathing, and especially on the gap between the out-breath and the in-breath, because this gap is analogous to death, whereas the other gap is analogous to birth. And as Brousse, a disciple of Lacan, observed (1996, p. 129), “Death is another name for the symbolic.” And from the symbolic point of view the gap is death.

Second, the gap has been extensively explored in Tantric Buddhism. See for example Trungpa’s commentaries (Fremantle and Trungpa, 1975) on The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo. In Tibetan bardo means gap. See also Trungpa (1992) on the six types of bardo.

Third, in his study of Zen and Japanese Culture, Daisetz Suzuki explains that the concept of suki is central to the Zen of swordsmanship as developed by the Samurai in Japan. He explains (footnote on p. 143) that “Suki ...means ‘a space between two objects,’ or ‘a slit or a split or a crack in one solid object.” Or, in other words, a suki is a gap. And it is important to realize, as Suzuki makes abundantly clear, that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the mastery of swordsmanship has nothing whatever to do with technique, or with speed, or with strength. It is entirely a matter of mastering the nature of the suki. In other words, what is essential is not the mastery of tactics, but the mastery of strategy. And according to the Samurai tradition strategy is a function of the gap. So the basic strategic principle is this: Gaps are points of weakness, so attack the gaps in your enemy; Conversely, eliminate the gaps in your self. Suzuki explains, for example (p. 194): “In swordsmanship the situation it creates is so acute and immediate (in the sense of ‘no medium’) as not to allow the interception of conceptual, consciously intellectual trickery. ...when intellecction interferes even an infinitesimal amount, time is wasted and the enemy has a chance (suki) to strike you right down. The swordsman faces reality and not conceptualization.” So to function symbolically generates gaps. So the swordsman must function at the level of wild language.