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## Is Neurosis a Private Language?

### Summary

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis was an extremely complex project in the field of research into the human *psyche*. His work is not only the proposition of a completely unusual solution to the dilemma of behaviour, new therapy – the talking cure – as one of his patients named it, but also a whole new hermeneutics, and theory of symbol. In this paper I would like to focus mainly on the latter, and investigate an idea of Jürgen Habermas, that neurosis could be understood as a private language. For this I would like to make use of Wittgenstein's metaphor of language as a game, plus further analyse his argument of private language, to which Habermas refers, I would then like to investigate the way in which Freud defines neurosis. In conclusion I shall investigate the interpretation of therapeutic process by Habermas, as I believe it is the core of this problem.

**Keywords:** neurosis, psychoanalysis, private language, Freud, Habermas.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis was an extremely complex project in the field of research into the human *psyche*. His work is not only the proposition of a completely unusual solution to the dilemma of behaviour, new therapy – the talking cure – as one of his patients named it, but also a whole new hermeneutics, and theory of symbol. In this paper I would like to focus mainly on the latter, and investigate an idea of Jürgen Habermas, that neurosis could be understood as a private language. For this I would like to refer to Wittgenstein's metaphor of language as a game, plus further analyse his argument of private language, to which Habermas refers, I would then like to investigate the way in which Freud defines neurosis. In conclusion I shall investigate the interpretation of therapeutic process by Habermas, as I believe it is the core of this problem.

Freud's approach is often criticised contemporarily, and much of this criticism is valid, however his work was original and innovative within many fields. In this writing I would like to examine his new way of looking at hermeneutics.

In literature this innovative approach is called the hermeneutic of suspicion. The term originates with Paul Ricoeur, who in his monumental work: “Freud and Philosophy: an Essay on Interpretation”, indeed invents a fitting title for the father of psychoanalysis – A Master of Suspicions, and places him in line with other masters – F. Nietzsche and K. Marx (Ricoeur 1985, 39). The distinctive qualities of these gentlemen, according to Ricoeur, are the way in which they perceive consciousness. For them: “Consciousness is false. It is just «a pretension of self-consciousness»” (Own translation: “Świadomość jest świadomością fałszywą, «uroszczeniem samowiedzy»”) (Ricoeur 1985, 120) and more precisely: “Masters of suspicion, show us «the truth as a lie»”(Ricoeur 1985, 39). For Nietzsche it is “the morality of slaves” and its true counterpart – “the morality of masters”, for Marx “the class consciousness” (which needless to say is false). Masters of suspicion claim that all of us are entangled with false meaning, and our knowledge is just mere illusion. We have an ethical imperative to doubt our knowledge, although without explaining theory we know nothing. This theory is supplied by hermeneutics.

Freud is quite distinctive from the other two masters. The reason being the fact that Freudian psychoanalysis is inseparable from its therapeutic *praxis*, which is an unending source of new meanings and ways to accommodate his theory of interpretation. Psychoanalysis as a project is also an open system, constantly evolving and highly complex, it is not surprising that it also inspires very complex, often contradictory interpretations drawn from other fields, such as the theory of literature, semantics, philosophy and many others. The propositions of Jürgen Habermas are of particular interest to me. Paweł Dybel in his analysis draws the reader’s attention to the Habermas premise that the primary and most characteristic feature of mental illness is a patient’s alienation in relation to society’s way of communication, which is the basis of human social existence. The patient creates a private language, and therapy is the way to restore the patient to “public communication” (Dybel 1995, 39–43):

The analyst instructs the patient in reading his own texts, which he himself has mutilated and distorted, and in translating symbols from a mode of expression deformed as a private language into the mode of expression of public communication (Habermas 1972, 228).

In speaking about private language Habermas, is referring to the philosophy of so called “later Wittgenstein” and his “Philosophical Investigations.” For Habermas neurosis is the creation of a patient’s private language. Private language is an argument proposed by Wittgenstein in his theory of language as games. Private language is a way to illustrate the dilemma of semiosis and privacy as an *aporia* of meanings. To investigate the Austrian philosopher’s argument let us take a look at points 257 and 258 of his work (Wittgenstein 1986), as I believe these show the argument most precisely. Let us consider the following problem – would it be possible to teach a child the notion of pain if humans did

not show any external signs of it? Probably not, “he couldn’t make himself understood when he used the word” (Wittgenstein 1986). But should this child come up with its own name for toothache, would it be reasonable to call it pain? Wittgenstein answers that such a child couldn’t know when would be the valid moment to use this notion. Furthermore as the philosopher writes: “when we speak of someone’s having given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word ‘pain’; it shows the post where the new word is stationed” (Wittgenstein 1986). Grammar here is understood as a set of rules that justifies usage of a word. We usually learn meaning of the word pain, when someone, while seeing we are in pain tells us: this is a pain – using ostensive definition. In the considered example ostensive definition is impossible.

In another example Wittgenstein asks us to imagine that we keep a diary about some recurring sensation. Every time we get this sensation we were supposed to write a letter “S” in our diary. Now we are asked to consider the following problem: Is “S” a sign? What exactly does it signify? Well, of course when we take a look into our diary we realise what we mean by “S”, but is it enough to call it a meaning?

In my opinion, the core of the problem here is: firstly – the definition of sign perceived in this way; secondly – the problem is the non-intersubjective nature it poses.

Concerning definition, in the classical sense, we would be looking at the *genus proximum per differentia specifica*:

1. So the first thing we need to do is to find the closest, higher level generic term for “S”.
2. Secondly, we need to point out the differences between this *species* to see if it even deserves to be seen as a different kind.

For the generic term we can say that “S” is a sensation, but the trouble starts when we try to find *differentia specifica*. As we know too little about sensation “S”, let’s fuse these two examples and say: We live in one of possible worlds, in which humans don’t exhibit any external signs of pain, so I don’t have a notion for pain, but every time I feel it, I write “S” in my diary. But even calling it in this way is too much, because I assume that everyone has something that can be collectively called a sensation of pain, and “S” is my way of signifying it (I presuppose here the existence of the grammar of the word “pain”). How can I be sure? I have never seen any other person in this universe having “S” – there are no criteria for me to establish the term “pain”. If “S” is really pain and no one knows about it but me, I could make some sophisticated experiments – like pricking people with a needle, and saying t h i s i s “S” – would it be enough? It seems as if we are facing here the similar problem as in Quine’s example with “Gavagai” (Quine 1999), another example of this kind is Searle’s thought experiment with John the genius, who discovers other’s *inner episodes* (Sellars 1956). How would these people know that I’m showing them “S” as a pain, and not for example the needle (this of course is also troublesome, if I would like to per-

suade authorities that I'm a philosopher, conducting an experiment, not a madman)? Furthermore even saying that "S" is the pain from this meta-level, as I do right now, is saying too much. I'm just filling the space reserved only for pain in another language game, therefore mixing two language games that ought to be separated. Therefore, the "S" cannot be something that can be intersubjectively experienced; it must be perfectly private, so hence no definition is possible. Wittgenstein defines private language as: "sounds that nobody else understands, and I \* seem \* to understand them" (Wittgenstein 1986).

This is precisely how Habermas would like to understand the nature of neurosis in Freudian psychoanalysis. In this approach the analyst's task would be to restore the patient's intersubjective language of "public communication", but he seems to read both of Wittgenstein and Freud in a very wishful way. Paweł Dybel evokes a very good argument (Dybel 1995, 101) from A. Lorenzer work "Sprachzerstörung und Rekonstruktion. Vorarbeiten zu einer Metatheorie der Psychoanalyse" (Lorenzer 1970). An example he uses is the case of little Hans – a boy of several years and Freud's patient, who suffered from a phobia of horses. During analysis, Freud discovered that for Hans, the word "horse" was a symbolic representation of the father figure, originating from a scene in his childhood, which was then repressed in the unconscious sphere. The boy, unable to accommodate this memory into his self-knowledge, had created a private language through which he communicated to the world the fear of the father figure, as anxiety, incomprehensible to others.

According to Lorenzer, the notion *horse* in the words of the boy hides a degraded symbol – the photographic plate (the term coined by Freud – *die Klischee*). This process allowed the boy's unconscious conflict with his father to be transferred to the word *horse*. The work of analyst here is to examine *signifiant*, which is within the sphere of public communication in the statements of the child, and finding a *signifié*, which is the actual sense of what they mean for him.

Here we could point out several significant problems, however. Using the central concept of the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein – the language game, which I have discussed above, one can say that the patient in his neurosis had developed the use of the word *horse*, violating the game rules of common language. But, the idea of using public communication language to make sense of repressed content, using psychoanalytical therapy seems a peculiar idea to me. Even if that was possible, words that are used by the psychoanalyst are of a different kind than those commonly used, contrary to what Habermas says, hermeneuticians forget the fact that Freud distinguished the words of ordinary language (or sphere of public communication) from *magic words* of the analyst (*talking cure*) (Dybel 1995, 43).

*The Talking Cure* is a term coined by Breuer's patient – Anna O. The magical power behind the words of the analyst is their ability to expose hidden meanings. Thus the Archimedian point of therapy is to expand the patient's

knowledge of himself. It seems obvious now, that usage of language, and the therapeutic relation itself is not common. I would even dare say that it is yet another language game and very different from the idea of public communication language. Summarising, I believe we could talk here about not one, not two, but three language games – public communication, language of the therapeutic relation and the patient’s neurosis, and his or her private language:

**Public communication (intersubjective, comprehensible language game)**

**Therapeutic relation (supposedly, the bridge between private language and public communication)**

**The meaning of patient’s neurosis (subjective, incomprehensible private language)**

Therapeutic relation is something really fascinating and one of the kind, if we look at it from a language perspective. This relation is asymmetrical:

- From the patient’s point of view it seems like the therapist is “the oracle”, that s/he came to visit, for words of truth. Instead patients get riddles and a lot of silence, which forces her or him to look for answers within her/himself. Gradually, the figure of psychoanalyst changes from oracle to convenient field of projections.
- On the side of the analyst, things are even more curious, as he or she has to maintain conversation, but only to the level at which the patient feels encouraged to talk. But more importantly, here is the place where the hermeneutic of suspicion gathers momentum – every sentence given by patients should be analysed as one that hides something underneath. Meanings here always have layers, giving justice to Freud’s rule that every word is just determined ambiguity.

The medium of therapy is the language of public communication, intersubjective and understandable, but used in an unusual manner, contrary to the typical *Lebensform* (using Wittgenstein’s term) of the language game, therefore much as in the case of neurosis – violating language game rules, although in an intentional manner. In a typical use of language we exchange meaning with each other under the consideration that the other side uses them with the same application, and that by using for example: the word “brick”, as in the famous Wittgenstein’s (Wittgenstein 1986) example of builders A and B from “Philosophical Investigations”, will mean just brick. The analyst, on the other hand, assumes that words of the patient fulfil a symbolic function – have layers that need to be discovered. This is why the psychoanalytical theory of interpretation is concerned with so called *psychopathology of everyday life* (Therapist have to interpret in an indirect way, P. Ricoeur calls it indirect interpretation – meaning by

meaning (Dybel 1995, 98). Paweł Dybel comes up with an apt metaphor for this situation:

Except that its indirectness is not in mediation between separate methods of interpretation, it is rather the confrontation with each successive signifiant of the unconscious and a searching in their allusive reference for certain common characteristics. These signifiant could be compared to a line of pagan idols that while facing each other pass secret signs, pointing in silence persistently in one direction. Only after the analyst traverses a complete row of these *signifiant* in the process of interpretation, while trying to determine what is common to them structurally, that she gets a chance to find a meaningful relationship between the output signifiant and its latent signifie.

(Own translation: Tyle że jej określność nie polega na zapośredniczeniu ze sobą w jej trakcie odrębnych metod interpretacji, ale na konfrontowaniu ze sobą kolejnych signifiant nieświadomego i wyszukiwaniu w ich aluzyjnym odesłaniu pewnych cech wspólnych. Owe signifiant można przyrównać do rzędu pogańskich bożków, którzy zwróceniu ku sobie twarzami przekazują sobie jakieś tajemne znaki, wskazując w milczeniu uporczywie w jednym kierunku. Dopiero przemierzając ów rząd signifiant w procesie interpretacji, starając się ustalić to, co jest im strukturalnie wspólne, analityk staje przed szansą odnalezienia istotnego związku między wyjściowym signifiant a jego utajonym signifie) (Dybel 1995, 101).

Here we already see some major trouble with the proposition of Habermas. Therapy is clearly not simple *exegesis* of meanings that are used incorrectly. It is unclear, how this process of bringing patients back from the sphere of private language to the sphere of public communication would look like, since as I have shown, the language game of therapy is nowhere near this sphere. I also doubt that Wittgenstein would agree with Habermas on this topic. As I believe, the essence of argument towards private language is to show its impossibility. Even if we reduce a private language of neurosis “S” to one character – just “S”, then there is a problem even if we talk here about semiosis, since the only criterion for the meaning of “S” is the owner of the language. Sign by definition is a carrier of meaning, as I believe we can talk about meaning only if that meaning is intersubjectively comprehensible. Hence Merleau-Ponty will say:

Thought understands itself and is self-sufficient. Thought signifies outside itself through a message which does not carry it and conveys it unequivocally only to another mind, which can read the message because it attaches the same signification to the same sign, whether by habit, by human conventions, or by divine institution. In any case, we never find among other people’s words any that we have not put there ourselves (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 48).

For Merleau-Ponty words are gestures – externalisations of meanings that have ability to *touch* meanings in others. Thought is not something *internal*, does not exist outside the world and is something beyond words. This is why externalisation of pain is not a *sign* of pain, it is a pain and I can only understand it because seeing external signs of it in others triggers in me the memory of pain (It is worth noting, that M. Merleau-Ponty, writes this very deep and sophisticated

ed theory in 1945 – 35 years before the first discovery of mirror neuron systems, which could be considered neuro-biological proof of his thesis).

The externalisation of sensation “S” wouldn’t trigger anything in anyone, but the owner of the private language, and I think the Viennese philosopher would agree on that with Merleau-Ponty.

Neurosis is very different, being by definition something one cannot understand or refuse to include in the area of self-knowledge, it therefore has to use: displacement, distortion, condensation etc. to cope with this situation, and at its extreme – gives birth to mental illness.

Neurosis as a private language is inspiring as a metaphor, showing the tragic absurdity of the existential situation of the neurotic, but in full seriousness this conceptualisation is flawed. It is unclear how there would exist a transition between the sphere of private language, through to the sphere of *magical words of therapist* to the much desired sphere of public communication. Habermas proposed his own interpretation how this process would look like. He shows that on an example of compulsory repetition neurosis:

[...] in each case, neurosis removes pathological repression and overcomes compulsory repetition and psychoanalytic self-reflection, in fact, “dissolves”, “overcomes” the causal relationship itself, which had previously connected a pathogenic agent with persistently repeated behaviour. [...]

In technical control over nature we get nature to work for us through our knowledge of causal connections. Analytic insight, however, affects the causality of the unconscious as such. Psychoanalytic therapy is not based, like somatic medicine, which is “causal” in the narrower sense, on making use of known causal connections. Rather, it owes its efficacy to overcoming causal connections themselves (Habermas, 1972).

However for me such a formulation does not solve anything, it is inconsistent, and poses other huge problems; moreover it does not take into account the differences within a psychoanalytical framework. A. Grünbaum provides a very convincing critique of Habermas theory (Grünbaum, 1984), showing that he did not understand how etiology of mental illness works in the first place (he even accuses Habermas of ignorance about basics of modern science).

consider a metal bar that is isolated against all but thermal influences. It is subject to the law  $L = \alpha \Delta T \cdot L_0$ , where  $L_0$  is its length at the fixed standard temperature,  $\Delta T$  the temperature increment above or below the standard temperature,  $\Delta L$  the length increase or decrease due to this temperature change, and  $\alpha$  the coefficient of linear thermal expansion characteristic of the particular material composing the metal bar. Now suppose that the bar, initially at the standard temperature, is subjected to a “pathogenic” temperature increase  $\Delta T$ , which produces the elongation  $\Delta L$  as its “pathological” effect. In addition to supplying this “etiology”, the law of linear thermal elongation also provides a basis for a corresponding “therapy”: It tells us that if the bar’s temperature is reduced to its “healthy” standard value, the “pathological” effect  $\Delta L$  will be wiped out. Thus, we can correlate the “therapeutic intervention” of temperature reduction with the patient’s remedial lifting of his own repressions. Similarly, we correlate the bar’s “neurotic symptom”  $\Delta L$  with the patient’s repetition compulsion (Grünbaum 1984, 14).

What is even more disturbing is the fact that Habermas and other proponents of the theory of neurosis as a private language forget that the repression mechanism is not only a pathology generating mechanism, but also the *sine qua non* of normal conscious experience, according to Freud (Freud 2010, 307–327). The hallucinatory and latent wish-granting quality of dreams, is caused precisely by the weakening or repression of the sensory (Freud 2011). This is why, removing the cause of compulsory repetition, which would be a repression, as a way of therapy, is just an absurdity and would undermine the basis of a psychological constitution. What also strikes me as in error is how homogeneous the public communication language is in the Habermas view, not taking into account psychoanalytical *praxis* and its very unique language game. Moreover I fault his belief in the way patients regain sanity, according to the proponent of private language view, hence I propose to reject the formulation of a patient's neurosis as a private language, or think of it rather as a metaphor and not a serious formulation. Habermas's idea of *dissolved causal relation of neurosis* as a basis of therapy is misguided, as Grünbaum convincingly shows in his example.

Concluding I believe, the discussed theory is *ad hoc* if not plainly wrong. It must be admitted though that it is interesting topic to tackle. I don't think it could be solved depending solely on the basis of the philosophy of language, as Habermas tries to do it. One should take into account in addition the philosophy or theory of language plus the way therapeutic practice is structured, and most importantly modern accomplishments in the field of neuroscience. Such research fields within existential and the semantic dimensions of neurosis should be approached as an interdisciplinary endeavour in the manner we find in modern cognitive sciences. An interesting example of such a research project is the work of Mark Solms (Solms 2002), employing the term neuro-psychoanalysis and I believe future research on psychoanalysis should take a similar direction, as Solms.

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## Czy neuroza jest językiem prywatnym?

### Streszczenie

Psychoanaliza Zygmuta Freuda była bardzo złożonym projektem badawczym w dziedzinie ludzkiej *psyche*. Jego praca nie jest tylko propozycją zupełnie nietypowego rozwiązania problematyki behawioralnej, nowym sposobem terapii – *talking cure* – jak to określiła jedna z pacjentek, ale również całkiem nową hermeneutyką i teorią symbolu. W tym artykule chciałbym skupić się przede wszystkim na tych ostatnich kwestiach i zbadać pomysł Jürgena Habermasa, że nerwica może być rozumiana jako prywatny język. Chciałbym przyjrzeć się metaforze Wittgensteina – języka jako gry, i przeanalizować jego argument języka prywatnego, do którego Habermas się odwołuje, a następnie spojrzeć na sposób, w jaki Freud określa nerwicę. Podsumowując, przyjrze się interpretacji procesu terapeutycznego zaproponowanej przez Habermasa, ponieważ uważam, że jest to rdzeń problemu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** neuroza, psychoanaliza, język prywatny, Freud, Habermas.