# transitivism or the *i*


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### Case vignette

Jonathan was almost eleven when his mother brought him to the clinic at the suggestion of his teacher. She explained, "Jonathan repetitively talks about the same thing, like the neighbours. It goes round and round in his head. They've threatened to call the police. We have to keep him locked inside. He gets rough at home; he kicks in the door and pushes his Dad." His mother had already designated Jonathan as autistic. When addressing him, she spoke in the third person, referring to herself as *Mummy* and her son as *Jonathan*: "Mummy gets cross when Jonathan pinches her". Jonathan also referred to himself in the third person, repeatedly saying, "Jonathan won't come here tonight". At the end of the session, he stared up at me with a perplexed expression and asked, "Where is me?"

Jonathan's words designate him as a grammatical third person. This raises the question of how we might consider Jonathan's use of pronouns, specifically the use or not of the first person pronoun *I*. It also brings up the question of how one might work with such a child. In this paper I propose to elaborate on these questions through the notion referred to by Jacques Lacan and others as *transitivism*.

### What is *I*? (*Je* est un autre)

"What is it to say *I*?" and "How does he learn to say it, this *I*?" These are questions posed by Lacan[2] in the lesson of 5th May 1954, in his seminar *The Technical Writings of Freud*. Lacan states that:

> *I* is a verbal term, whose use is learned through a specific reference to the other, which is a spoken reference. The *I* is born through the reference to the *you*. The child repeats the sentence one says to him using *you* instead of inverting it with the *I*.[...] But it is enough to warn us that the *I* is constituted at first in a linguistic experience, in reference to the *you*, and that this takes place within a relation in which the other shows him, what? – orders, desires, which he must recognize, his father's, mother's, educators', or his peers' and mates'.[3]

Here Lacan puts forward that the pronoun *I* is acquired by the child through his relation to the other, through discourse. In the child's early attempts to use pronouns, he echoes the words of the other, referring at times to himself as *you* and the other as *I*. Through the introduction of language, there is already a fundamental alienation of the subject in the Other.

In "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis", Lacan writes "*I* is an other" [4], making reference to the words of the poet Rimbaud, who in 1871 wrote:

> Romanticism has never been properly judged. Who could judge it? The critics! The Romantics! Who prove so clearly that the singer is so seldom the work, that's to say the idea sung and intended by the singer.
>
> For *I* is another. If the brass wakes the trumpet, it's not its fault. That's obvious to me: I witness the unfolding of my own thought: I watch it, I hear it: I make a stroke with the bow: the symphony begins in the depths, or springs with a bound onto the stage.[5]

So, what is it to say *I*? Roman Jakobson includes personal pronouns such as *I* and *you* in a category of grammatical units referred to as *shifters.* He states:

> The general meaning of the grammatical form called *shifter* is characterized by a reference to the given speech event in which the form appears. [...] The first-person form of a verb, or the first-person pronoun, is a shifter because the basic meaning of the first person involves a reference to the author of the given act of speech.[6]

Jakobson describes the characteristics of the shifter, stating: "Every shifter [...] possesses its own general meaning. Thus *I* means the addresser (and *you* the addressee) of the message to which it belongs".[7]

In Jakobson's linguistic framework, the shifter has a purely grammatical function. Within this category of shifters, the first person pronoun *I* has a particular significance, referring to the person who is speaking or addressing another, the *you*, in a given utterance.

Lacan makes reference to the term *shifter* in numerous papers, but uses this not simply in a grammatical sense. With Lacan, the term *shifter* comes to designate a signifier in which we can locate the presence of the subject. In "The subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious", he proposes that grammatically, the *shifter* or *indicative* is something that "designates the subject in the sense that he is now speaking".[8]

The work of Emile Benveniste is also frequently cited by Lacan. Benveniste[9] uses the term *indicator* rather than *shifter*, and includes in this category personal pronouns, as well as other indicators of person, time and place. He argues that pronouns are in a category which he calls *empty indicators* or *signs*. Benveniste states:

> These [*empty*] signs are always available and become *full* as soon as a speaker introduces them into each instance of his discourse [...] Their role is to provide the instrument of a conversion that one could call the conversion of language into discourse. It is by identifying himself as a unique person pronouncing *I* that each speaker sets himself up in turn as the *subject*.[10]

If the first person pronoun *I* designates the subject, or one who is speaking in the current utterance, how can we conceptualise use of the third person *he*, *she* or *it*? Benveniste contrasts first person from third person, describing the latter as: "someone or something outside the instance itself, and this someone or something can always be provided with an objective reference."[11] He provides the example: "Pierre is sick; *he* has a fever".[12] In being referred to in the third person, Pierre is in the place of object, and is thereby located outside of direct address. According to Benveniste's argument, *he* could not possibly be the *I* or the *you* in this instance. He adds that in certain languages, the *third person* is literally a *non-person*.

We could put forward, following Benveniste's proposition, that Jonathan, in being addressed by his mother in the third person, is placed outside of the utterance, in the place of non-person, or one not yet able to take up the place of subject. We also hear Jonathan refer to himself in the third person, thus designating himself as object, outside of discourse.

## What is transitivism?

Lacan briefly mentions transitivism in a number of papers, citing the work of Henri Wallon in developing his own theorization. In "The Role of the Other in the Consciousness of the Ego", Wallon[13] proposes that *transitivism*, which he terms *alternation*, occurs as a normal stage in

the development of the child's personality. The first stage in this process is the *alternation phase*. Wallon states:

> Elsewhere I have called attention to the games of alternation in which the child repeats the same act while changing his role therein: first he plays at being the agent of the act vis-à-vis the other person, then at being the object of the act as performed by the other. For instance, first he deals a blow, then he receives one. By means of this swapping of roles he comes to grasp the necessary distinction between the one who acts and the one who is acted upon.[14]

Wallon points out that in this alternation phase the child is barely able to distinguish himself from his peer: there is an *equivalence*. Here he is alluding specifically to the play of young children who "carry on a dialogue with themselves"[15] between two supposed characters or interlocutors, the child's language consisting largely of babble. Following the alternation phase, there is a *combative phase.* In this phase, which is based on rivalry, the child no longer pretends to be two people, but begins to use the words *I* and *me* with abnormal frequency. It is also during this combative phase of competitiveness and aggression between the child and his peer, initially over an object, that the child starts to distinguish *mine* from *yours*.

Thus, in his developmental framework, Wallon proposes that the child must pass through a series of phases in order to distinguish himself from his peer. Initially *equivalent* to his peer, through the process of alternation, the child comes to recognise himself as different. Wallon asserts that this change is reflected in the child's language. More specifically, we could add, it is reflected in the child's use of pronouns or shifters. Wallon's work preceded that of Jakobson or Benveniste by many years, before the term *shifter* was introduced; however, he identified the child's use of the words *I, you, mine* and *yours* as significant in marking the child's emerging sense of himself as distinct from his peer.

In his lesson of 5th May 1954, Lacan[16] takes up Wallon's notion of *equivalence*, relating transitivism to the mirror phase. He proposes:

> The point at which the mirror phase vanishes is analogous to the moment of see-sawing which occurs at certain points in psychic development. We can observe it in these phenomena of transitivism in which one finds the infant taking as equivalent his own action and that of the other. He says - *François hit me*, whereas it was him who hit François. There's an unstable mirror between the child and his fellow being.[17]

Lacan also speaks of equivalence and transitivism in his lesson of 30th November 1955, stating:

> What takes place between two young children involves this fundamental transitivism expressed by the fact that one child who has beaten another can say – *The other beat me.* It's not that he is lying – he *is* the other, literally.[18]

Lacan introduces transitivism in a number of other papers and seminars, citing the work of Charlotte Bühler[19], who conducted research based on observational work with infants and children in institutions in Vienna. In his paper "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis"[20] he theorises about transitivism in the child's relations with his peers, stating:

> During the whole of this period [between six months and two and a half years of age] one will record the emotional reactions and the articulated evidences of a normal transitivism. The child who strikes another says that he has been struck; the child who sees another fall, cries.[21]

Lacan also mentions transitivism in "Presentation on Psychical Causality" [22]. He writes:

> A child can thus, in a complete trance-like state, share in his friend's tumble or attribute to him, without lying, the punch he himself has given his friend. [These phenomena] are understood by Bühler in the dialectic that goes from jealousy […] to the first forms of sympathy. [They are] *mirrored*, in the sense that the subject identifies, in his feeling of Self, with the other's image and that the other's image captivates this feeling in him".[23]

From these citations it appears that Lacan's theorisation of transitivism, like Wallon's, is based largely on the child's relation with his peer. However, Lacan takes his theorisation further, bringing the symbolic into the equation. He emphasises the *words* of the child – *François hit me* or *The other beat me* – uttered when the child, not the other, was the protagonist in each case. In such instances, the child does not use first person pronoun *I*, since, in the mirror phase, there is an equivalence: the child identifies with his peer. Lacan posits that it is the mirror phase which precipitates the *I*. He proposes:

> This moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the imago of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy (so well brought out by the school of Charlotte Bühler in the phenomenon of infantile *transitivism*) the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations.[24]

Therefore, in Lacan's theorisation, transitivism is conceptualised beyond the relation of *subject* and *object* to include three terms. He brings the subject and object to the fore, but in reference to a third term: the Other of language.

The French analysts Bergès and Balbo[25] take up Lacan's theorisation of transitivism and elaborate upon it in their various works, even devoting a book to the topic. They consider the specific examples of transitivism in children provided by Lacan, and note that in each case somebody is *hurt*, whether *hit*, *struck* or *beaten*. We also heard earlier that Jonathan *pinches* Mummy. Thus, Bergès and Balbo relate the notion of transitivism to sadism and masochism, in regard to children in the first instance. It is this insistent theme that leads Bergès and Balbo to propose that what is central to transitivism is the suffering of the body. They put forward that:

> Transitivism is like the *negation* of what is experienced by the other. We can define the logic of transitivism as a logic that situates it between the satisfaction by an hallucinatory object of desire, and double negation. This is a means of taking account of clinical experience: a child hurts himself without reacting (first negation) and it is an other that complains about it without suffering from it (second negation).[26]

According to their notion of transitivism it is not the one who is hurt who suffers, but the other. They state:

> I suffer from the blow that the other receives, perhaps without suffering […] I yell but I feel nothing, but that means that I know very well what pain is, pain that I attribute to the other. This is a trait by which masochism is born.[27]

In this account we hear something of the masochism and sadism of the other that is brought into play. Bergès and Balbo take up Lacan's conceptualisation of transitivism, specifically its third term: the symbolic. However, they take this idea a step further, developing a notion of the transitivism that occurs between the child and the other, specifically the mother. In their theorisation, symbolic anticipation is central to transitivism. In symbolic anticipation, the mother has the hypothesis that there is a subject in the child, and anticipates that her child will come into language, rather than him being a reflection of herself. She consequently puts her

hypotheses about what has happened to him into discourse. For instance, seeing her child fall she says, "Ow!" Or seeing him shiver she asks, "Are you cold?" The child hears the words of the mother and thereby identifies not with her, but with her *discourse*. In this way the child is pushed or forced into language, thereby allowing him access to the symbolic. They state:

> This transivist forcing anticipates and conditions the forcing that subsequently pushes the child to enter, for better or for worse, the field of speech and language, and eventually that of written language.[28]

However, Bergès and Balbo caution that the mother can become *fixed* in this transitivism, and the child equally so:

> This is produced when the mother's anticipation of what the child experiences always falls back upon the verification of the hypothesis that she had made of what the child experienced […] There is no longer any gap that is able to be tolerated between what she anticipates of her functioning, of what she experienced, and the real functioning and experience which might be the child's.[29]

When such fixity occurs, the mother does not hypothesise that the child's experience will be different to her own. That is, there is no symbolic anticipation. Bergès and Balbo argue that this lack of hypothesis of a subject in the child is not uncommon in the case of the autist. And in Jonathan's case we noted that his mother continued to address him in a particular way, suggesting that for her there was no hypothesis, only certainty.

Bergès and Balbo put forward that the autist who looks at himself in the mirror perceives only an empty indicator. We could propose that this occurs in relation to the fixity of what we can call an *imaginary transitivism*, in which the child is unable to access the symbolic. It is through the symbolic anticipation of the mother, mediated through her discourse, that there is an hypothesis of a subject in the child. By virtue of this resides the possibility that the child can mark his own place as subject through his own speech.

## Conclusion

As the sessions progressed over a number of weeks, Jonathan's questions evolved to asking, "Are you Debbie?" and "Where is Debbie?" When he was able to attend sessions on his own, Jonathan began to speak in the first person. He made demands such as, "I'm thirsty" and "I want…" In an attempt to initiate and direct play, he also began to respond to the questions he had previously posed, saying, notably: "*You* are Debbie". Some months later, he posed a somewhat different question: "Am *I* Jonathan?" In uttering these words, Jonathan was finally able to pose a question in relation to his own place as subject.

The place of the analyst in working with such a child is to allow the opportunity for this type of questioning to occur. In anticipating that the child might come into discourse, the analyst allows a space for the child to speak, listening for whatever way a subject might be present. Consequently, the question of the use of pronouns can be considered as a modality through which the subject enters into discourse, the analyst listening for this *I* or any other shifter that might mark the child's place as subject in his speech.

Through transitivism, the image that the child perceives in the mirror is able to pass over from the imaginary to the symbolic. In the mirror, the child sees himself in the eyes of the mother. But through transitivism, the mother, anticipating that her child will come into language,

speaks. This verbal exchange is something which might allow the child an entry into discourse.

By introducing into the conceptualisation of transitivism a third term, the Other of language, Lacan brings the symbolic into the formulation. Bergès and Balbo extend this notion, thereby taking it beyond the peer relation to consider the child in relation to the other, specifically via the discourse of the mother. We can therefore conceptualise transitivism not as a developmental stage, but as a structural phenomenon of the speaking being.

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