

**Introduction to a translation of J.C.-Milner's article "Sens opposées et noms indiscernables"**  
**Presented as a Case Study on the Identity of the Signifier**  
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*The introduction that follows consists of two parts. The first part presents a brief historical sketch of the problem of opposed senses (or *Gegensinn*) starting with Freud's appropriation of this notion as put forward by Abel, moving to Benveniste's critique of this appropriation and ending with Lacan's explicit responses to this latter critique. In this sketch I only attempt to articulate the discursive situation of this notion and the problems to which it gives rise without supplying solutions. The objective here was to set the scene from which Milner's intervention would draw its fullest meaning. The second part, which in fact was written first, presents a critical reading of Milner's article. Here I attempt to push Milner's arguments further than he left them in his own paper and to draw certain distinctions and correlations that in my view are necessary to make. The reader should be aware that this second part assumes familiarity with Milner's paper and that, consequently, a reading of the translation before the second part is the best approach.*

**Part I: Situation of the Problem prior to Milner's paper**

To those who, thanks to Lacan, still read Freud, the following history should be well-known: In the third section of the sixth chapter of the *Interpretation of Dreams*—entitled “The Means of Representation in Dreams” (Die Darstellungsmittel des Traums)—Freud put forward the following thesis: the dream-work—which constitutes the thought of the unconscious—does not admit of negation, or, what amounts to the same thing, contradiction. An element of the dream signifies opposites indifferently.

The context in which this thesis is stated is important to recall: the section is ostensibly concerned with how the logical relations that occur in the essential dream-thoughts, and constitute thought and judgment in ‘waking’ life, are “represented” by the dream-work in the dream. A closer reading, however, reveals a far more subtle problematic. For there are two considerations that suffice to problematize this representational scheme according to which the function of the dream-work is to produce a representation of the essential dream-thoughts in a form that circumvents the censor and satisfies the conditions of representability (Darstellbarkeit). First, the aim of dream-analysis is not to uncover the essential dream-thoughts per se—which, as the representational scheme implies, would entirely replace the dream—but to provide an account of the dream-work—that is, precisely the residuum of this substitution: what in the representation escapes the representation.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, what is represented in the dream is the dream-wish, albeit in a distorted form,

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<sup>1</sup> The situation is comparable to Marx's theory of surplus value according to which surplus arises from the fact that the worker is not compensated for the actual work done but for the equivalent of this work in terms of labor-time. In a similar manner we may say that when the dream-work is paid back, so to speak, by exchanging the dream with the essential dream-thoughts something of this work itself is left out of account. For the real problem is to know why a representation had to be produced to begin with. Why couldn't the essential dream-thoughts stand on their own? Why did it take *work*?

while what escapes this representation is the *work*. Second, in the seventh chapter of *Interpretation* (in the section on the forgetting of dreams), Freud gives us an unmistakable indication of this non-representational trace within the dreamt representation when he proposes that there is always a hole in the dream-thoughts—i.e. a point where the tangle of thoughts cannot be completely unraveled and where they reach into the unknown, the so-called navel of the dream<sup>2</sup>. One must be careful here: it is not that the dream-thoughts are incompletely represented by the dream, but that what is represented contains a hole. Yet a representation that, at a point, represents nothing, i.e. a hole, can no longer be a mere representation. Consequently, it would be more correct to say that the work of the dream-work *polarizes* or *generates* the dream-thoughts rather than *represents* them. From these considerations we must conclude that the dream-work's status and dignity as thought owes nothing to any thought content it may represent.

And indeed, in the third section of the sixth chapter, it's not so much a question of how the dream-work "represents" logical relations differently, i.e. by other means, but rather how it constitutes a radically different form of thought—namely, one in which what determines the logical relations of 'waking' thought as *relations*, e.g. the ordering and orientation of their terms, is not operative—despite the fact that what seems most characteristic of thought as thought is the affirmation or denial of relations. This is so true that Freud is forced to make the following paradoxical statement at the end of the chapter: "the dream-work is not simply more careless, more irrational, more forgetful and more incomplete than waking thought; it is completely different from it qualitatively and for that reason not immediately comparable with it. It does not think, calculate, or judge in any way at all; it restricts itself to transforming."<sup>3</sup> The first part of this passage affirms what the second part plainly denies: the dream-work *does* in fact constitute a kind of thought because it is no less rational or complete and because it is interpretable; but it is not comparable, at least outside the act of interpretation, with the thought, calculation, and judgment of 'waking' life—so much so that one can even doubt whether it thinks, calculates, or judges at all. Consequently, what is being put forward here is not the denial of the status of thought to the dream-work but its *incommensurability* with 'waking' thought. Now this incommensurability is especially marked in the case of negation: for if negation is revealed to be lacking in the unconscious it is because it is not operative there where it ought to be from the standpoint of 'waking' thought. The thesis of the absence of negation therefore must be considered within the context of this more general problematic: what constitutes this other scene of thought *as thought* and what relation does it bear to what is called 'waking' thought? It is known that Freud conceived this other scene of thought to be a more 'primitive' form of thought—one from which 'waking' thought develops, though not without leaving an insistent residue.<sup>4</sup>

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What is important therefore is not the essential dream-thoughts per se but what in them *resists* representation and thereby explains the necessity of the work.

<sup>2</sup> *Interpretation*, Ch. VII, Sec. A, p. 525 in the Standard Edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Interpretation*, Ch. VI, Sec. I, p. 507. The last two clauses of the German are: "Sie denkt, rechnet, urteilt überhaupt nicht, sondern sie beschränkt sich darauf umzuformen."

<sup>4</sup> At this point, the opposition between the thought of the dream-work and 'waking' thought—aligned with the opposition between unconscious and conscious—is evidently quite problematic. But this problematic status is explicit in Freud's work; for it must be remembered that Freud struggled throughout to give an adequate definition of the unconscious, noting from the outset the inadequacy of defining it in terms of consciousness. Initially, he identified the unconscious proper with what

About a decade after the publication of the first edition of the *Interpretation*, Freud encounters in an article by the comparative philologist Carl Abel what he regards to be a corroboration of his original thesis on the absence of negation. Abel's article is titled "Über den Gegensinn der Urworte" (1884)—"On the Antithetical Sense of Primal Words". Freud announces his findings in a short article of the same name in 1910 and in a footnote to the third edition of the *Interpretation* in 1911.<sup>5</sup> According to Abel, certain words of ancient languages—i.e. those more 'primitive' or closer to their 'origin'—did not *from the outset* distinguish between opposites but rather denoted "the relation or difference" between them. Only in a *second* moment, once these words were supplied with determiners or accompanied by gestures, were the distinctions made and signified. He illustrates his thesis primarily through an analysis of certain hieroglyphs of ancient Egyptian. What is important to note at this juncture regarding Freud's reference to Abel—beyond the question of whether the content of Abel's argument is valid from the standpoint of the standards of rigor in force today—is that Freud found it perfectly consistent with his conception of the unconscious to propose that, at least as concerns the absence of contradiction, the unconscious is structured in the same way as the significations of languages (albeit those considered 'primitive'). Therefore, in his reference to Abel, Freud situates the unconscious no longer as a problem of thought but rather as a problem of ('primitive') signification<sup>6</sup> in language.

It is this thread that Lacan takes up seriously when in 1954-55 he invites the eminent linguist Émile Benveniste to make a contribution regarding Freud's appropriation of Abel's notion of *Gegensinn*. This invitation results in a written article by Benveniste titled "Remarques sur la fonction du langage dans la découverte freudienne" (1956)—originally published in the first issue of the journal *La Psychanalyse*. In this article Benveniste puts forward a scathing critique of Abel's arguments on two fronts. First, he completely dismantles Abel's analyses of the linguistics facts by showing that in every case the supposed double sense was a result of incorrect methodology. Second, he rejects the notion of *Gegensinn* on the grounds that it violates the fundamental principle, put forward by Saussure, that language (no matter how 'primitive' it may be said to be) is nothing

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he called the dynamic unconscious (i.e. repression, which is a kind of negation) as opposed to the descriptive unconscious (i.e. what is denied the attribute of consciousness). Later he corrected this position by stating that the unconscious does not have to be repressed and that it can even become conscious, as in the case of psychosis as well as *Verneinung* (denial). The one unmistakable constant however that one can point to in the various definitions/descriptions that Freud gives of the unconscious is that they are all stated in terms of some kind of negation that, in a sense, fails to negate (for example, the negation implicit in repression is only of any importance to the extent that it entails the *return* of the repressed, i.e. repression fails; the same must be said of *Verleugnung* (disavowal) in fetishism, *Verwerfung* (foreclosure) in psychosis, and even *Verneinung* (denial) in analysis—regarding which see the brief discussion below). This is no less true in this third section of the sixth chapter (the 'no' is not operative, it fails). One might venture to propose that in Freud the unconscious tends to present itself as a non-negativizable thought. Now, by the time of Lacan, the unconscious, and by extension the opposition stated here, will be entirely reformulated as a torsion/cut inherent to the structure of signification—and it is to this problem that this paper is effectively dedicated.

<sup>5</sup> The article is translated by Strachey as "The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words" (1910). The footnote is found in *Interpretation*, Ch. VI, Sec. C, p. 318, added to the passage where the thesis of the absence of negation was originally stated.

<sup>6</sup> We use the word "signification" throughout in the following precise sense: the noun "signification" designates the act or process of signifying something and not the signified or thing signified itself. This is consistent with the fact that "signification" is the result of the transformation of the *verb* "to signify" into an action noun.

other than a system of signifying elements (or signs) whose identities are determined strictly differentially—that is, by their positions in relation to all the other elements in the system rather than by any properties they may exhibit outside this system.<sup>7</sup> Now given that every signifying element, in its identity, necessarily exhibits two sides—that of signifier and signified—it follows that in a signifying system there can be no distinction in the signified that is not supported by a distinction in the signifier and vice versa: “it is a contradictory intention to simultaneously impute to a language the knowledge of two contrary notions [i.e. of signifieds] and an identical expression [i.e. a signifier] for these notions.”<sup>8</sup> But Benveniste does not restrict himself to this purely linguistic argument in this article. He goes further: “a language is an instrument for arranging the world and society, it is applied to a world considered as “real” and it reflects a “real” world. But here each language is specific and configures the world in its own proper manner.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the system of differences that language constitutes is nothing other than a way of distinguishing between things. This position can be argued as follows: Things insofar as they are distinguished are things insofar as they are *signified* and vice versa (to signify something is to distinguish it; to distinguish something is to signify it). To the extent then that the system of language governs the distinctions among signifieds, it also governs the distinctions among things. Now, if there were a distinction not expressed in the system, then this would be an in-existent distinction, falling entirely outside the range of the signified: “supposing there is a language where “large” and “small” are said identically, this would be a language where the distinction between “large” and “small” literally has *no sense* and where the category of dimension does not exist.”<sup>10</sup> If we follow Benveniste’s logic here to the limit, from the standpoint of the system, such a distinction could not even be signified as insignificant or in-existent without contradiction—for it would have to be signified in order to be rejected as such.

Having established Abel’s arguments as fallacious, Benveniste goes on to propose two corrections to Freud, which are worth mentioning here: first, he attributes Freud’s error of referring to Abel to his constant recourse to the notion of the ‘primitive’ as ‘historical origin’. If unconscious tendencies are more ‘primitive’, argues Benveniste, it nevertheless remains that they are *coextensive* with those ‘secondary’ processes that oppose and distort them. As he writes: “an Oedipus free to marry his mother is a contradiction in terms”<sup>11</sup>—that is, the ‘primitive’ desire for the mother cannot be separated from the ‘actual’ interdiction. In short, the problem cannot be solved by appealing to a past (mythical or historical), as Freud is often inclined to do, but must be responded to structurally. Second, Benveniste suggests, without pursuing the matter very far, that the correspondence between organized language and the unconscious—an instance of which Freud thought he had found in Abel—should rather be reexamined in light of the notion of *Verneinung*, or denegation, which Freud had presented in a 1923 article. To recall but briefly, in this article Freud considers certain examples drawn from his practice where something is avowed in the very act of being negated: e.g. “you ask who this person in my dream

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<sup>7</sup> This differential/positional character of the identity of the linguistic sign is what underlies the rejection of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles which will be discussed in part II.

<sup>8</sup> *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (henceforth *PLG*), p. 82, Gallimard, 1966.

<sup>9</sup> *PLG*, p. 82. This constitutes the Whorfian aspect Benveniste’s argument that Milner will disambiguate from the strictly linguistic one.

<sup>10</sup> *PLG*, p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> *PLG*, p. 84.

could be ... it's *not* my mother."<sup>12</sup> Such examples lead him to conclude that the repressed content can be made conscious on the condition that it is negated (though, as Freud notes, this only leads to an 'intellectual' acceptance of the repressed since the repression continues nevertheless to persist 'affectively'). For Benveniste, Verneinung is a clear demonstration of the fact that linguistic negation cannot but symbolize what it negates. Consequently, every judgment of inexistence is in a sense a judgment of existence (much for the same reason that a name cannot but admit, *in a certain sense*, the existence of what it names even if it names, for example, a fictional character); or, to put the matter in a rather paradoxical form, 'nothing' *cannot* be symbolized. Without going into further detail here, what is important to remark at this juncture is that for Benveniste the contradiction that the notion of *Gegensinn* entails is not reproduced by Verneinung. Evidently this is because Verneinung does not, for him, violate the distinctions instituted by the system (even though in Verneinung the enunciation is at odds with what is enunciated). If there is a contradiction, it is rather placed on the side of the subject who avows the repressed in repudiating it.

Lacan's response to Benveniste's critique is from the outset one of disappointment. In seminar III (1955-56), where we have some indications of his initial response, his tone remains cautious. He accepts Benveniste's critique of Abel as valid from the linguistic standpoint but continually qualifies it: "last year we heard a powerful critique by M. Benveniste from the point of view of linguistics. It remains nevertheless that Freud's remark takes on the whole of its importance from the experience of the neuroses."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in this seminar Lacan broaches the question of *Gegensinn* only twice and each time in the context of an analysis of Schreber's notion of *Grundsprache*, or fundamental language (a form of antiquated German with a tendency towards the use of euphemism and antiphrasis). Even at this early stage an opposition is being made—later to be more forcefully marked—between the psychoanalytic and the linguistic approaches to the notion of structure: the first concerned with the constitution of the subject; the latter with the constitution of the system of 'la langue'. Again, further on in the seminar: "Last year M. Benveniste gave us something that has all its value from the signifying point of view, namely that it is out of the question that in a signifying system any word should designate at once two contrary things because they are made precisely in order to distinguish between things ... But once we pass on to signification, it's another matter."<sup>14</sup> Here Lacan opposes signification (as the *act* whereby the signifier is made to signify the thing) to the regime of distinctions among things (as instituted by the signifying oppositions of the *system*). In the latter case we have merely a static synchronic opposition between *names* while in the former case it is a question of *how* the signifier is used in act to name the thing.<sup>15</sup> It is in the act of signification that, for Lacan, the signifier-signified correspondence (*not* the signifier-thing correspondence) ceases to be univocal.

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<sup>12</sup> "Die Verneinung" (1923)

<sup>13</sup> Seminar III, lecture II, p. 36 in the Seuil edition.

<sup>14</sup> Seminar III, lecture VIII, p. 124 in the Seuil edition.

<sup>15</sup> This distinction anticipates the one made by Benveniste himself, which we discuss in part II of this introduction, between the semiotic and semantic modes of signification.

In a footnote to the written version of the seminar on the *Purloined Letter* (written in the summer of 1956) Lacan's dissatisfaction with Benveniste's critique is made more explicit. There he writes: "It would please us to pose once again before M. Benveniste the question of the antinomic senses of certain words, whether primitive or not, after the masterful rectification he provided of the false path Freud took in engaging the question on philological grounds. For it seems to us that this question remains whole, until the *instance of the signifier* is brought out in its rigor."<sup>16</sup> [italics is our emphasis] Two conclusions can be drawn from this remark. First, the root of the opposition encountered in the signified must be situated in the signifier itself, and more precisely its instance. Consequently, the question is not how two already distinct and opposed signifieds can come to be signified by one and the same signifier; but rather how the signifier's own interference in the signification it supports accounts for the disruption of the univocity of the signified and the inversion of sense (i.e. how the signifier is *generative* of the opposition). Second, what Benveniste's critique has failed to bring out rigorously is the signifier's instance *rather than* its op-positional value in a system. In a first pass we may say that this instance, as opposed to op-positional value, is the signifier considered as *act* rather than as *system*. After all, the signifier is only a signifier in the act of signifying (i.e. the signifier *signifies*, essentially). And it is in this act that it *causes* the signified, which likewise has no status outside of this act. In contrast, as pure position in a system, the signifier is not, strictly speaking, a signifier at all—for the simple reason that it does not signify (it has only a value); it is merely one of the two co-determinant and indissociable aspects of the semiotic sign. Or, otherwise said, the signifier's act is presumed already exhausted, in principle, in a system of signs. This much said, it remains that for Lacan the identity of the signifier is no less determined through difference. Consequently, the notion of the instance of the signifier must imply a notion of difference, and by extension that of synchrony, to which the act of the signification is no longer external: i.e. the act is not outside the system, and the system not outside the act. Synchrony and diachrony must not be opposed as *statics* to *dynamics*. The entire theory of metaphor and metonymy, that is to say of the signifying chain, can be thought of as a result of working out such a notion of dynamic synchrony.

Lacan's last mention of Benveniste's critique is found in his response to question II of *Radiophonie*<sup>17</sup> (1970). Here the tone ceases to be conciliatory: "[the] deficiency [carence] of the linguist, I was able to experience it in a contribution I requested from the greatest among the French."<sup>18</sup> However, this deficiency is not stated as specific to Benveniste's contribution; it is rather stated as specific to the position of the linguist. What then is this deficiency of which Benveniste's contribution is only an example? Within the context of the question to which Lacan is responding, it concerns structuralist linguistics' inability—due to the way in which its discourse is instituted and insofar as it aspires to be a science—to measure up to the very notion of structure upon which its unprecedented success is based. Linguistics' structuralism fails to adequately distinguish structure from form

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<sup>16</sup> *Écrits*, p. 22, Seuil, 1966.

<sup>17</sup> There are two versions of *Radiophonie*: the spoken (recorded) and the written (published). In what follows we refer to the written version. Question II reads as follows: "Linguistics, psychoanalysis, and ethnology have the notion of structure in common. Starting from this notion, can one imagine the proposition of a common field that would one day bring together psychoanalysis, ethnology, and linguistics?" (*AE*, p. 407)

<sup>18</sup> *Autres Écrits* (henceforth *AE*), p. 410, Seuil, 2001.

and takes up the former only to end up subordinating it to the latter (whence the notion of *la langue* whose particularity—that is, the fact that it is only ever *one langue among others*—Lacan characterizes as “that by which structure falls under the effect of the crystal”<sup>19</sup>). Linguistics cannot, Lacan writes, account for its own condition of possibility: “the unconscious can be, as I have said, the condition of linguistics. But, for all that, linguistics does not have the least bit of hold on the unconscious. This is because it leaves blank what produces an effect there: object a.”<sup>20</sup> It is this “leaving blank” of object a that is the “carence” that Lacan claims to have experienced with Benveniste’s critique. In this regard, it is important to add that Lacan provides a second, “less anecdotal”, example of this same “carence”: what he calls the “lapsus” committed by Saussure in qualifying the particular of *la langue* as *arbitrary*. This second example is especially significant in the context of Benveniste’s critique of *Gegensinn* because he himself had critiqued Saussure’s ‘arbitrary’ in his well-known paper “*Nature du signe linguistique*”<sup>21</sup> (1939) and, what’s more, for precisely the same reasons that he would later reject *Gegensinn*: signifier and signified are, according to Saussure’s own principles, co-determinate within the system; consequently, their relation, if one is to speak of a relation, cannot be anything but *necessary*; what’s arbitrary is the relation between the linguistic sign and the extra-linguistic entity called the referent; Saussure’s error was to judge, in a momentary lapse of rigor, which albeit was not entirely without reason, the intrinsically determined association of the signifier and the signified by the extrinsic relation of the sign and the referent.<sup>22</sup> Now, within the limits of this brief introduction it will evidently not be possible to do justice to this problem of the arbitrary. We will therefore have to limit ourselves to the following observation, in anticipation of its full development in a future work: Lacan is here proposing that *both* qualifications of the signifier-signified dyad—as arbitrary in

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<sup>19</sup> *AE*, p. 410.

<sup>20</sup> *AE*, p. 410.

<sup>21</sup> *PLG*, p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> It must be mentioned that Lacan’s reading of Saussure’s ‘arbitrary’ differs from Benveniste’s in significant ways: for Lacan the arbitrary is an attempt on Saussure’s part to characterize the *particular* of *la langue*—the fact that there is no system of *la langue* that is not *one among others*; for Benveniste, on the other hand, the arbitrary is rather a characterization of the relation of adequation between language and reality (which does not fall within the purview of the linguist). To make these two readings equivalent would amount to assuming that the particularity of a system of *la langue* effectively comes down to how it relates to an extra-linguistic referent (i.e. that languages are comparable only by reference to an extra-linguistic third). But this is not self-evident; for one can also consider the possibility of an intra-linguistic reference (i.e. how a language refers to itself thereby incorporating the space of alterity in which it instantiates itself as a particular). However it may be, one surprising consequence of Benveniste’s rectification of Saussure, in reaffirming the necessary against the arbitrary, seems to be that no system of *la langue*, considered intrinsically, would thereby be able to contain the signifier of its own particularity—i.e. of the fact that there are other ways of instituting distinctions. A remarkable passage in Benveniste confirms the direction of this reading. We cite it here in full: “to pose that the relation [between the sign and the referent] is arbitrary is a way for the linguist to *defend himself* against [the] question [of the accord between language and reality] as well as against the solution that the speaking subject instinctively brings to this question. For the speaking subject there is complete adequation between language and reality: the sign covers and commands reality; better, it *is* this reality (*nomen omen*, taboos of speech, magical power of words, etc.). In truth, the point of view of the subject and that of the linguist are so different in this regard that the affirmation of the linguist regarding the arbitrariness of designations does not refute the contrary sentiment of the speaking subject.” (*PLG*, p. 52) In this passage the thesis of the arbitrary has for Benveniste a twofold function: on the one hand, it guards against the illusion, presumed ‘natural’ for the speaking subject, of taking the particular organization of a language for the organization of reality (cf. Kant’s insistence on distinguishing between phenomenon and things-in-themselves), and on the other hand, it brackets the question of truth as external to linguistics.

Saussure's case and as necessary in Benveniste's—participate in the same “carence”, i.e. the evasion of object a. It is known that Lacan proposed to qualify this dyad instead by the contingent. This latter fact gives rise to a two-pronged question of modal logic: (1) How is the contingent to be rigorously distinguished from the arbitrary?<sup>23</sup> (2) The contingent is often defined as that which could have been otherwise. But how is this definition applicable to the situation in question where signifier and signified cannot be considered in abstraction of each other so as then to be imagined otherwise in relation to each other? Ultimately, this question amounts to the following one: how can there be a contingent *in itself*?<sup>24</sup>

This concludes our sketch of the situation of the problem of *Gegensinn* antecedent to Milner's paper. We will now proceed to part II of our introduction. In this second part our mode of presentation will be more analytic: starting with the main thesis of Milner's paper and working our way towards the details of the argument.

## **Part II: Situation of the Problem within Milner's Paper**

Let us state from the outset the basic argument of Milner's intervention. It can be summed up simply enough: the notion of *Gegensinn* and the notion of linguistic analysis that Benveniste upholds are *both* based on the rejection of the Leibnizian principle of the identity of indiscernibles.<sup>25</sup> This principle states that it is impossible for two distinct entities to resemble each other perfectly; there being required at least one point of dissimilarity to ground any difference. Otherwise stated, there is no difference by pure position or number (that is, things cannot differ solely by the difference of their positions or by the sole fact that there are two or more of them).

In the case of *Gegensinn*: a hieroglyph or a dream-element, which counts as one from the standpoint of its properties, counts as two from the standpoint of what it signifies (i.e. its position in signification). In the case of Benveniste's linguistic analysis: two linguistic elements must be distinguished on grounds of the difference of their respective positions in linguistic systems in spite of their perfect similarity from the standpoint of their phonological and semantic properties. In both cases there prevails a radical *cut* between two regimes of identity and difference: one based on properties and the other based on positionality. We may say that the first is an *intrinsic* determination of identity; the second an *extrinsic* one.

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<sup>23</sup> To illustrate this question with an example, consider the speed of light as a physical constant. No one would describe the determinateness of this constant as arbitrary; they would qualify however as contingent (for it could have been different if the physical laws were different). Only the units chosen in its measure can be qualified as arbitrary.

<sup>24</sup> For in the definition commonly given of the contingent, something is designated as contingent only against the background of another imagined possibility (i.e. something is not in itself contingent but only in relation to this other possibility).

<sup>25</sup> The use made of this principle here, despite the fact that it has its origin in a particular metaphysics (the monadology), should not be considered metaphysical. For we are not concerned here with the question of substance or being but exclusively with the question of identity. We are therefore making a logical use of this principle.

In the context of this paper we will call a position *Leibnizian* if it affirms a perfect correspondence between the intrinsic and the extrinsic of identity and *anti-Leibnizian* if it affirms a non-correspondence or cut between the intrinsic and the extrinsic.

Now the very principle that necessitates this cut for Benveniste—namely, that language is a *system* of distinctions—is also what leads him to uphold, against Gegensinn, the univocity of the elements of language. The identity of a linguistic element—with its two co-determinant sides of signifier and signified—is determined by its position in the system to which it belongs and not by the properties it expresses outside this system. But if this is so then the instance of the system is revealed in its purest form precisely at the point where a distinction is necessitated that is in no way warranted by properties; but also conversely, at the point where an identity must be affirmed in spite of a distinction that properties demand. In this sense, a demonstration of this cut is equivalent to a demonstration of the instance of the system itself. However, as Milner points out, Gegensinn too presents us with such a cut. We can therefore say that Benveniste's emphatic rejection of Gegensinn is based on forgetting the discordance that this cut (which underlies his own linguistic analysis) implies and on misrecognizing that Gegensinn reflects this very discordance. Such is, *grosso modo*, Milner's explicit contribution.

Yet the argument that Gegensinn is a mirror image—albeit an inverted one<sup>26</sup>—of the discordance between properties and positions found in Benveniste's linguistic analysis, runs counter to another observation that Milner's reading also allows us to make. There is one stark difference that disrupts the symmetry between Freud and Abel on one hand and Benveniste on the other: the insistence by the former on a *primary* indistinction of sense as the basis of distinctions. The entire first part of Milner's paper consists in an attempt to rectify this notion of indistinction as what in fact underlies Gegensinn; and a correct reading of it is of fundamental importance. We will therefore return to it shortly. But, in contrast to Freud and Abel, Benveniste insists on beginning with the system of distinctions as in principle *already* established in its totality (that is, the act of distinction has in principle already exhausted itself in a total system). It is only in a second moment that a sort of indistinction emerges due to the occlusion of the distinctions of the linguistic system by the imaginary effect of properties. Benveniste's act of linguistic analysis consists, in effect, in reaffirming the distinctions of the system to the exclusion of these imaginary effects.

This asymmetric difference concerns therefore how the notion of indistinction is conceived (i.e. as either primary or secondary, internal or external to the structure of signification). Formally, we may say that indistinction is the *one* that is counted twice at the point where the disjunction between properties and positions is isolated; correlatively, we may also say that Gegensinn is the *two* that is counted as one at the same point. The

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<sup>26</sup> Let's recall what this inversion consists of for Milner: in the case of Gegensinn, what counts as one from the standpoint of the signifying system (i.e. an element of language, including the language of the dream) counts as two from the standpoint of the designated reality revealed in the interpretation. In the case of Benveniste's linguistic analysis, what counts as two from the standpoint of the system of language counts as one from the standpoint of its reality outside this system. In the first case, an element of language is divided in the name of reality; in the second case, an element of reality is divided in the name of language.

problem however is to determine what the ‘relation’ between this one and this two is within this cut. For despite the fact that this cut is equivalent to the denial of any relation between the intrinsic and extrinsic of identity, it nevertheless remains that it presupposes the localization of a symptomal point of coincidence. In other words, the cut, in denying that there is a relation, localizes a relation. We are therefore led to consider seriously what Benveniste calls in his own article—but only as a figure of absurdity—a “non-relating relation”<sup>27</sup>.

If for Benveniste what counts as one from the standpoint of properties counts as two from the standpoint of positions within a linguistic system, it nevertheless remains that the symptomal point of coincidence between them is merely imaginary and that their cut separates two wholly external orders. In this regard, Benveniste’s linguistic demonstrations consist not in affirming a one that is two but in affirming a pure two or a pure one in absolute separation. This is confirmed, for example, by his refutations of the antithetical character of the latin terms ‘altus’ and ‘sacer’: in each case the purported double sense of these words is shown to be the result of an imaginary comparison—that is, of a projection onto their identities of properties they exhibit from outside the systems to which they belong.

But in the case of *Gegensinn*, the point of coincidence is not imaginary—i.e. it is not the result of an external comparison—precisely because indistinction is primary. The clarification of this point requires that we situate more precisely the primacy of indistinction over distinction within *Gegensinn*; on the way to this end will have to make a crucial distinction between Abel’s position on *Gegensinn* and Freud’s.

To begin then: if indistinction is primary, it can in no way presuppose the distinction to which it is indifferent; in fact, if it were to be defined in terms of this indifference *to* the distinction, this would imply that distinction is presupposed by indistinction. But indistinction is presented as the *ground* of distinction. It follows that indistinction must be conceived in *non-relative* terms; that is, indistinction, considered in itself and as such, bears *no relation* to distinction. Note that for this very reason we must guard against hastily reducing *Gegensinn* to a contradiction—which presupposes a distinction (incidentally, Milner is quite careful to situate indistinction rather on the side of the excluded middle<sup>28</sup>). What is more, and again for the same reason, there is nothing fuzzy or blurred about indistinction; all such characterizations relativize indistinction to a distinction. Following Abel, we may say, along with Milner, that the indistinct element names the pure difference itself *prior to* the distinction of terms; evidently then, this difference is not relative: it is *not* the difference *between* two terms.

It is in order to emphasize this non-relativity of indistinction that Milner takes such care, first, to qualify the use of negation in Freud’s formulation of his thesis (which seems to imply that *Gegensinn* is derived from an established opposition—the result of a kind of negation of negation), and second, to distinguish *Gegensinn* from the effects of both censorship and *Verneinung* (which are, according to him, both operations performed on the basis of established paradigmatic and syntagmatic oppositions). This leads him ultimately to write

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<sup>27</sup> *PLG*, p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> “The word that apparently designates at the same time strong and weak designates properly speaking *neither one nor the other* but the relation between the two.” Citation from Milner’s paper.

concerning *Gegensinn*: “it is a question of situations where there is no linguistic paradigm, no opposition between *names* (even though there are differences between things signified).” Here we encounter the anti-Leibnizian cut upon which Milner’s main argument rests. But we also encounter something else.

For at this point Benveniste can raise his objection: what accounts for the distinction between things signified if not the fact that they are named distinctly? What other support is there for the distinction between things signified than the distinction between names? And here Benveniste has reason: for the thing signified is the thing *insofar as* it is signified; consequently, the distinctions between things signified can only be made through the fact of being named distinctly. How then can such distinctions not be in accord with the identities of names *as* names? And if this is the case, must we not admit that the purported differences between things signified are in fact projections of differences external to the order of names in question?

We are therefore confronted with a dilemma: on one hand, we must preserve the cut of discordance between the name and the named—precisely because indistinction requires it; and on the other hand, we must not allow what is named to become external to the structure of the identity of what names—for in this case indistinction would cease to be primary *over* distinction and we would lapse into Benveniste’s position.

But the very formulation of this dilemma gives us the answer: the cut of discordance between what names and what is named—between the one and the two—must be an *internal* cut. The name, in naming, deviates internally from itself. Or again, the one of indistinction must be *intrinsically* two. Indeed, if Freud poses that a certain dream element signifies, for example, ‘sexual innocence’ at one point in the associations and ‘sexual impurity’ at another, this is evidently because he does not count two distinct signifiers that are merely confused by their imaginary resemblance—as a linguist might—but because he affirms that it is one and the same signifier that is internally split in signification. The one does not simply count, externally, as two; the one *is* two. The whole problem of *Gegensinn* is to account for the instance of this One of the signifier as Repetition.

This observation compels us to pose our own objection to Milner: the rejection of the Leibnizian principle does not suffice to account for this notion of *internal difference* that *Gegensinn* requires. The latter cannot simply imply what Milner calls a non-correspondence *between* Ones (e.g. non-correspondence between properties and positions); rather it implies a non-correspondence of the One to itself. The cut of non-correspondence must enter into the One: for what is in question is precisely this non-correspondence itself as One.

In view of the foregoing argument, let us make a distinction between a *weak* anti-Leibnizian position—where the cut situates an external difference—and a *strong* anti-Leibnizian position—where the cut situates an internal difference. Given this distinction, Benveniste’s linguistic analysis can be characterized as weakly anti-Leibnizian.

There then remains the question: are both Abel and Freud anti-Leibnizian in the strong sense? To answer this question we must submit the notion of internal difference to the test of the distinction between Abel’s position and Freud’s. Milner for his part does not explicitly make this distinction; he takes enough care to bring out the

differences between the authors' formulations but only to reduce them with regard to what he diagnoses as essential: undecidability, non-corresponding Ones, disjunction between properties and positions—three notions which are successively introduced by him in the attempt to clarify the notion of primary indistinction and which are treated in his text as almost equivalent.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless he leaves a sufficient number of indices for us to be able to reconstruct the distinction ourselves.

To begin, let us simply observe that if for Abel a signifying element is indistinct *because* it names the category or relation prior to the distinction of terms, we cannot necessarily say the same for Freud. From the fact that the same dream-element signifies one thing and its opposite at different points in the dream-thoughts, Freud does not conclude that this element is in fact signifying the category or relation. He simply states that the 'no' of the opposition is not operative in the element in question. Of course, one can take this formulation (of the absence of negation) to be a misstep on Freud's part—because if indistinction is defined in terms of the absence of negation then an opposition seems to be presupposed by it. But then, even if we correct for this fault, are we necessarily brought back to Abel's position where it is the category or relation that is being named?

There is in fact a crucial difference here: for if the element is conceived as naming the category or relation, this implies that a neutral, undivided signification is being postulated for this element—a kind of 0 degree signification. That is, the distinctions between things signified which are not distinguished by the name itself are rather constituted as degrees of deviation from a privilege signified that the name does name univocally (and where the deviation is =0). This 0 degree would therefore be the condition of the signification of the distinctions but it would not be any the less univocal for that. This last point is not lost on Milner, for he insists repeatedly that there is no necessary contradiction between Benveniste's position where the signifier-signified correspondence cannot be anything but univocal and Abel's position where there is a primary indistinction of sense qua category or relation.

But insofar as Freud sticks to his formulation of the absence of contradiction, he does not tip the scale in this direction. No 0 degree signification or sense is necessarily assumed to make up for this absence. If we admit this point, then it is no longer the signified qua category or relation that is indistinct but the signifier itself. The instance of the One of the signifier occurs precisely in the lack of any 0 degree signification or sense. In other words, no neutral point is postulated where this One would be undivided. Or again, there is no deviation *from* a

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<sup>29</sup> For example, in this regard, it is important to distinguish between *undecidability* and *indistinction*: undecidability refers to a vacillation in the subject, whereas indistinction refers to a gap in the identity of the object. In Milner's paper undecidability is introduced in order to disambiguate indistinction. But this is misleading. It can lead one to think that indistinction is nothing other than the subject's inability to decide (i.e. something is indistinct because it is undecidable for a subject). To rectify this one would have to pose that what's in question is in fact a *real* undecidability: i.e. the undecidability in the subject has its roots in the gap in the identity of the object itself. Milner nevertheless hints at this in the following passage: "The dream is not open to every interpretation. It is not even properly speaking equivocal: the tangled significations can be divided up on distinct lines. Thus, the Ones do not coincide but the principle that there is such a thing as One is not thereby abolished. On the contrary, it is the alpha and omega of the *Deutung*. One could therefore say that undecidability is turned on its head: far from founding the indeterminacy of the analysis, it isolates the necessity and the power of the One."

point 0; the deviation is fundamentally internal. Indistinction is not situated as a 0-sense but instead as an irreducible *absence* of sense (not to be confused with no sense, which would be Benveniste's position).

From the standpoint of the distinction we have just made, only Freud's position can be characterized as anti-Leibnizian in the strong sense. This is because there is no assumed privileged point that allows difference to be externalized; or again, in signification, there is no 0 *in relation to which* the distinctions are determined as deviations. By contrast, and for the opposite reason, Abel's position must be characterized as weakly anti-Leibnizian despite the fact that an element of indistinction qua 0 is considered to be the basis of distinctions. This however leaves us with the task of finding a more precise statement of what sets Abel's position apart from Benveniste's.

Were we to consider these 0 elements apart from their function as reference points for deviations, there would be no point of contradiction between Benveniste and Abel—because these elements are in themselves univocal. A contradiction would emerge only if Benveniste's notion of the system of distinctions excludes the possibility of elements that function as 0s. We therefore have to consider the degree to which these 0 elements can be accounted for in differential terms; or, said otherwise, we have to consider the notion of difference implicit in these 0 elements. What is essential, we propose, is that these elements imply a minimally *non-complementary* notion of difference; and it is the demonstration of this fact that we will now attempt to sketch.

A 0 element is characterized by the fact that it is not merely opposed to other elements in a complementary fashion, but rather holds the *place* of an opposition. From this fact we may say that it inscribes the absence of this opposition itself as a necessary term in the system. In this respect, it is not just a pure absence, but, stated in the manner of R. Jakobson, an absence opposed. To take an example: let's say a 0 element signifies the category 'force'. This element cannot as such take a position *in* the 'weak'/'strong' opposition (it opposes neither). Instead it opposes the *marking* of this opposition itself and thereby signifies the place where this opposition could emerge as marked. In short, it constitutes a kind of *unmarked* term.<sup>30</sup> What is crucial to note here is that the mark *presupposes* that the absence of an opposition or a sign is itself included, as a neutral term, in the structure of the system. What's more, note how, within this oppositional configuration, the presence of the absence of a feature like 'weak' is not equivalent to the presence of the opposite feature 'strong'—hence what we are calling a minimal non-complementarity.

Now, with the introduction of this opposition to the second power—that is, the opposition of the presence and absence of an opposition—we obtain not a mere *sign* but a *mark* (and it is here that Abel's reference to the use of gesture and other determiners in signification should take on its fullest import). A mark is distinguished from a sign by the fact that it doesn't just signify something, it also signifies its *position* as sign; it signals the *presence* of

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<sup>30</sup> As it will become clear below, the unmarked-marked opposition that we are presenting at this point is not exactly the same as the one found in the work of Trubetzkoy and Jakobson. This is because at this turn in our argument we are attempting to keep as close as possible to the oppositional configuration implied by Abel's notion of indistinction as category or relation.

a signification. A mark implies a minimal degree of reflexivity in signification. To take up the above example: the marked term ‘weak’ (let us write it as ‘force<sup>-</sup>’) doesn’t merely oppose the other marked term ‘strong’ (‘force<sup>+</sup>’), it also, and primarily, opposes the unmarked term ‘force’. By this fact its significance is *doubled*: it signals the presence of the opposition *as well as* a particular position in that opposition.

It is remarkable that neither Benveniste nor Milner noticed the striking similarity between Abel’s notion of indistinction and the linguistic notion of the unmarked term developed by Trubetzkoy and Jakobson. Of course, one can argue that this is *merely* a similarity, a rather forced one, and that it would be an error to assimilate the two. And, indeed, we would be remiss not to point out that there is a crucial point of dissimilarity between them as well: for unlike Abel’s indistinct term, the structuralist unmarked term, considered as a category, must also be capable of designating one of the terms *within* the category. Put in terms of the above example, the unmarked term ‘force’ could be used in contexts where ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ are not distinguished *as well as* in contexts where, for example, only ‘strong’ is designated. It would follow from this that there is only one marked term ‘weak’ and that ‘strong’ is what the unmarked term ‘force’ signifies when it is used in opposition to the marked term. In brief, for Trubetzkoy and Jakobson, there is no strict vertical distinction between category and term precisely because the category can also fall to the level of a term within the category.

But the strict identity of Abel’s indistinction and the linguistic notion of the unmarked term is not what is important. What is important is the very possibility of this assimilation. For what we encounter in Benveniste is the lack of any attempt to problematize the notion of difference underlying the system—for example by recognizing that if the identity of a signifying element is determined through difference, then, in order to account for the identity of difference (what would amount, in effect, to the *act* of signification/distinction), one must have something like the *difference of difference*. Instead, complementarity is taken for granted and, from this fact, the possibility of any notion of a supplementary difference internal to the structure is precluded from the outset.

Now, this omission becomes particularly significant in light of the schism that Benveniste himself explicitly articulated in 1969<sup>31</sup> between two mutually necessary but irreconcilable modes of linguistic signification (in French: signification): the *semiotic* and the *semantic*.

The semiotic mode concerns only the *recognizability* of linguistic signs as distinctive units in a linguistic system (and we must remember that in principle there are no signs that are not recognized as such by someone, e.g. by a ‘community’ of speakers). At this semiotic level one can only ask: is a given phonetic or written sequence significant or not? Or, is such a variation on such a sequence sense discriminant or not? One cannot ask however *what* a sequence means, for to do so would imply that the signified can be displaced relative to the signifier, which violates the unity of the semiotic sign. The sole aim of a strictly semiotic analysis is to isolate the criteria of distinctivity operative at different levels in a given system.

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<sup>31</sup> *PLG II*, “Sémiologie de la langue”, Gallimard, 1974.

But, as Benveniste notes, language is characterized not only by the fact that it is structured as a semiotic system but also by its capacity to act as an interpretant of semiotic systems in general (that is, by its capacity to translate one set of signs into another set of signs). Furthermore, linguistic signification cannot simply consist in proffering recognizable signs but in producing messages: “messages are not reducible to a succession of units to be identified separately; it is not the addition of signs that produces sense, it is on the contrary the sense (the ‘intended’), conceived globally, that is realized and divided up into particular ‘signs’.”<sup>32</sup> A message is not a mere integral of signs yielding a higher level sign. This intended *x to be comprehended* is articulated in signs without being reducible to their semiotic sum.<sup>33</sup> At the level of the message—where, in effect, we pass from the domain of the sign to the domain of *discourse*—there must necessarily be a minimal discordance between signifier and signified (not because the signified is independent of its articulation in signifiers but because the message is constituted fundamentally in its *anticipated* achievement in reaching its address).

Now, if we look closely at what both the metalinguistic and message-producing capacities of language essentially imply, it is the *necessity* of signifying substitutions—i.e. a unit must stand in *for another* in a syntagm. And it is precisely because an element cannot stand for itself—i.e. cannot correspond to itself, as signifier and signified do in the sign—that another *must* stand in its place to make up for this internal lack. (Incidentally, it is not an accident that in French the word for substitute is *suppléance*—lit. supplement). However, from the semiotic standpoint signifying substitution is not possible. When, in semiotic analysis, one substitutes a unit for another in a syntagm in order to determine whether this substitution results in a distinct valid unit (what is called commutation), this does not constitute a *signifying* substitution—but only a transition from one sign to another with no intrinsic abiding reference. Though Benveniste does not formulate the matter exactly as we have (he does not articulate the problem in terms of signifying substitution), it is in order to account for this other, no less essential, mode of language’s functioning that he is led to supplement the semiotic mode with the semantic.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *PLG II*, p. 64.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Lacan, “Instance of the Letter,” *Écrits*, p. 502: “Whence we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that meaning *insists*, but that none of the chain’s elements *consists* in the signification it can provide at that very moment.”

<sup>34</sup> It is of crucial importance not to confuse the semantic mode (“la mode sémantique de signifiante”) that Benveniste isolates with either term of the traditional demarcation between semantics and pragmatics. Semantics in this traditional sense may be defined as the study of the relation of a linguistic expression to what it refers to in abstraction from the communicative or discursive function that that expression acquires in usage. Therefore, given that Benveniste’s semantic mode is concerned with the production of messages—and by extension with the dimension of enunciation—it must be carefully distinguished from semantics in this sense. However, the semantic mode must also be distinguished from pragmatics. Pragmatics studies how language is used in a discursive or communicative context; it studies in short the utterance and all that issues from it (such as Austin’s speech-act). In this regard, it covers much the same grounds as the semantic mode. But the crucial difference consists in the fact that pragmatics considers the functions that a linguistic expression takes on in the instances of its usage as being external to the structure of language itself. In contrast, for Benveniste, what is important is that the semantic capacity is fundamentally constituted in and through the structure of language (i.e. the enunciation as well as the enunciator are not external to language but are installed through it). See in this regard Benveniste’s “De la subjectivité dans le langage” (1958) as well as his “L’appareil formel de l’énonciation” (1970).

Evidently, from this semantic standpoint the identity of a unit is not determined by its position in the semiotic system but by how it is used in the production of a message or in the interpretation of another sign (that is, by its discursive instance). We encounter here therefore, formulated in different terms, the abovementioned disjunction between the order of the identity of the name (which amounts to the semiotic) and the order of the identity of the named (which amounts to the semantic). It nevertheless remains, however, that the schism between these two modes is, for Benveniste, irreconcilable and even impassable. He writes: “In reality the world of the sign is closed. From the sign to the phrase there is no transition, neither by syntagmation nor otherwise. A hiatus separates them.”<sup>35</sup> Further: “the semiology of language was blocked, paradoxically, by the very instrument that created it: the sign. One could not put aside the idea of the linguistic sign without suppressing the most important character of language; nor could one extend it to discourse without contradicting its definition as minimal unit. In conclusion, it is necessary to go beyond the Saussurean sign as the unique principle upon which both the structure and functioning of language would at once depend.”<sup>36</sup> One cannot read this passage in light of Benveniste’s earlier analysis of *Gegensinn* without noting the irony: the semiotic sign, in the name of whose identity *Gegensinn* had to fall, must itself be overcome because it renders discourse impossible. But the impasse of the semiotic sign is nothing other than the irreconcilability of the schism between the semiotic and the semantic. To go beyond the semiotic sign is to overcome this schism itself and vice versa. The following question therefore imposes itself: how is this schism to be overcome if it is nevertheless necessary to hold to the principle that the identity of signifying material is determined through difference? The semiotic sign constitutes an impasse precisely because the notion of difference underlying its identity is complementary. Consequently, what is required is a non-complementary notion of difference that will account for an internal supplementary difference. And this latter is ultimately nothing other than the identity of the signifier as a One that does not correspond to itself.

To conclude, Milner’s paper has for us a twofold import: first, it allows for the disambiguation and clarification of the notion of primary indistinction which Abel and Freud raise; & second, it shows that this notion is situated precisely at the point where Benveniste encounters the schism between the semiotic and the semantic (that is, the impasse of the semiotic sign). It is by formulating the notion of a primary indistinction—as Abel and Freud attempt to do in different ways: a kind of 0 element in the first case and an absence of sense or void in the second—that the *act* of signification (or distinction) can be brought into the *system* of significations (or distinctions).

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More directly, see his critique of Austin in “La philosophie analytique et le langage” (1958). Much of Benveniste’s oeuvre attests to an attempt to avoid falling into this traditional demarcation (even at the cost of sustaining a certain aporia).

<sup>35</sup> *PLG II*, p. 65.

<sup>36</sup> *PLG II*, p. 66.