



Unlocking the Unconscious: Freud's Psychoanalytic Concepts in Language, Dreams, and Everyday Life

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Abstract

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories have profoundly influenced the examination of the unconscious mind, language, and human behavior. This article examines fundamental Freudian concepts, including parapraxis, repression, defense mechanisms, sublimation, projection, cathexis, condensation, and displacement, with a focus on their manifestations in quotidian life. This paper will utilize Freud's original texts, such as *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), to illustrate how unconscious desires, repressed emotions, and psychological defenses are reflected in our language, memory, and dreams. This article underscores the significance of Freud's foundational concepts and subsequent psychoanalytic interpretations in elucidating the intricate relationship between unconscious processes and conscious expressions in language and behavior.

Keywords: Freud, psychoanalysis, unconscious, parapraxis, repression, ego defense, sublimation, projection, cathexis, condensation, displacement

Introduction

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, changed the way we think about the mind. He proposed that a significant portion of our cognition and behavior originates from unconscious mechanisms. His most important works, like *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), show how our language, memory, and actions can reveal hidden desires and repressed feelings. Freud posited that quotidian errors, such as verbal slips, memory failures, and misplaced objects, are not arbitrary. Instead, they show how we feel and how we deal with problems that haven't been solved. Freud

famously said, "No mortal can keep a secret." If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore" (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 94).

The next parts talk about Freud's most important psychoanalytic ideas, like parapraxis, repression, ego defenses, sublimation, projection, cathexis, condensation, and displacement. We will put these ideas in their language and psychological contexts.

Parapraxis

Freud coined the term "parapraxis" in his 1901 work, *"The Psychopathology of Everyday Life."* James Strachey later translated this work into English.



Parapraxis is when you make mistakes on purpose, like saying something wrong, writing something wrong, or forgetting something. These mistakes can show thoughts or feelings that you didn't mean to say. These occurrences, often referred to as "Freudian slips," reveal unconscious desires. Freud asserts, "Almost invariably I discover a disturbing influence from something outside of the intended speech; I am able to demonstrate that the slip of the tongue possesses sense and intention, arising from the simultaneous activity of another intention which is justly suppressed" (The Psychopathology of Everyday Life 78). For example, if someone wants to write "peaceful" but instead writes "stressful," this mistake could show that they are more anxious than calm. Also, forgetting a friend's birthday could mean that you are angry or resentful but don't want to show it.

Repression

Repression is a fundamental aspect of Freud's theory of the unconscious. He first talked about it in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Repression is the mental process that keeps unacceptable thoughts, desires, and memories from being aware of them. Freud asserts that repression constitutes the fundamental basis of psychoanalysis: "Repression is the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests" (Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis 147).

Traumatic experiences, particularly those from childhood, are frequently repressed yet may subsequently manifest through dreams, verbal slips, or anxious conduct. The concept of the "return of the repressed" illustrates how unresolved conflicts can subconsciously affect thoughts and behaviors. In language, this may manifest as word choices that inadvertently disclose concealed emotions. Freud identifies a paradox: the more one endeavors to repress something, the more probable it is to reemerge in an altered form.

Ego Defenses

In *The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence* (1894), Freud introduced the concept of ego defenses, which Anna Freud later elaborated on in *The Ego and the*

Mechanisms of Defence (1936). Ego defenses are unconscious strategies employed by the mind to manage anxiety and internal conflict. Some of these mechanisms include denial, displacement, projection, and sublimation. In daily life, individuals alter reality to protect themselves from distress; for example, someone saying, "I am just taking a break, I am not really lazy," exemplifies rationalization, an ego defense that conceals deeper insecurity. While these mechanisms offer protection, they can also obstruct authentic emotional expression.

Sublimation

Freud introduced sublimation in 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905). He described it as a defense mechanism that changes unacceptable impulses into socially valued activities. Sublimation redirects potentially disruptive energy into creative or productive outlets. Freud explains that "sublimation is a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct's directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction in this process, the accent falls upon the deflection from sexuality (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 145). For example, a child who cannot express emotions might show them through painting. Likewise, adults might turn frustration from work stress into artistic or intellectual activities, which helps them find emotional balance and contribute to society.

Projection

The American Psychological Association defines projection as putting one's own unwanted impulses on other people. Freud thought projection was a key defense mechanism that pushes internal conflict outward. Instead of saying "I am angry," a person might say "They are angry at me." This twist makes people less responsible for their own actions and makes conflicts with others worse. Freud talks about how projection affects prejudice and human relationships in his lectures. He shows that people often deny their own unacceptable feelings by projecting them onto others.



Cathexis

Cathexis is the act of putting emotional energy into a person, thing, or idea. The word comes from Freud's use of the word to explain how libidinal energy attaches to representations in the mind. Freud wrote about cathexis as a positive or negative activity. Cathexis of an object, or positively investing emotional energy, is shown in relationships, careers, or hobbies. De-cathexis is the withdrawal of the emotional energy attached to an object and is often used to describe depression. According to Freud, "We suppose that the psychical energy which serves the purposes of the cathectic processes is a quantitative variable, capable of increase, decrease, displacement and discharge" (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 8). Nostalgia for one's hometown or significant emotional investment in a first love are examples of cathexis. In both cases, the idea of Nostalgia is an example of a deep attachment and meaning-imbuing cathectic processes.

Condensation

Condensation, as Freud defined it in the context of dream interpretation, happens when a single word or symbol captures multiple ideas or feelings. This selectively hides thoughts that have been repressed while also letting them come to the surface in some way. Freud said, "The dream is the disguised fulfillment of a repressed wish" (The Interpretation of Dreams 160). A simple example of condensation is how someone who had the traits of a lion could be called a "lion," which could mean bravery, strength, or leadership in one symbol. Literary texts also show condensation, and these texts have symbolic imagery that captures many layers of emotion. For example, Plath's poem "Tulips" uses just a few words to symbolize many layers of devotion, confinement, isolation, and longing (as do many of Plath's works).

Displacement

Displacement, which is closely related to condensation, is the act of moving emotional energy (or intensity) from its real object to a safe substitute. Freud talks about this in The Interpretation of Dreams when he says that repressed material can

come back in a different form: "There can be no doubt that displacement is one of the chief means of achieving the distortion which is typical of dreams" (The Interpretation of Dreams 319). A quintessential illustration of displacement is the transference of anger directed at colleagues onto a family member within a domestic context. A more nuanced illustration of displacement is the manner in which phobia may function as a displacement of unresolved conflicts, redirecting an intense emotional experience towards an object or situation—where the phobic scenario seemingly bears minimal or no relation to the resolved conflict.

Free Association

Freud created free association as a key part of psychoanalysis. He told patients to speak out loud without saying no to anything, which let their unconscious mind flow. Freud said, "So say whatever comes to mind out loud." Just picture yourself as a traveler sitting by the window of a train car and telling someone in the car about the beautiful scenery you see outside. (On Beginning the Treatment 13) This method showed how language can free and reveal hidden thoughts and desires.

Language's Use of Symbols

Freud thought that words still had a lot of their original magical power and could change how people feel and think. He said: Words were once magical, and they still have a lot of that magic today. Words can bless one person or make another person feel hopeless; words can help a teacher pass on knowledge to a student; and words can move an audience and shape its opinions and choices. (A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis 56). This shows how deeply language affects the unconscious.

Test of Word Association

Carl Jung is often credited with the word association test, but Freud was already using the same idea to find things that people weren't aware of. He observed that particular reactions to stimulus words might disclose a repressed thought, thereby exemplifying



his theory regarding the connection between language and unconscious thought.

Ambivalence in Speech

Freud talked about how feelings can be ambivalent, meaning they can have two different meanings at the same time. He said, "The formation of reactions against certain impulses gives the false impression of a change in content, as if egotism had turned into altruism and cruelty had turned into sympathy." The emergence of these reactions is facilitated by the presence of numerous impulses that manifest almost immediately in contrasting pairs; this phenomenon is known as the ambivalence of feeling, a concept that remains largely unfamiliar to the general public. (Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis 145). This uncertainty often shows up in language, where words can mean two different things at the same time.

Paronomasia (Puns and Wordplay)

Freud examined humor and linguistic ingenuity to illustrate that puns (paronomasia) function as indicative evidence of unconscious cognitive processes. In his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud said that humor lets people talk about things that would normally be socially unacceptable by changing the meaning of words. Wordplay, homonyms, and double entendre all let people express desires that they had been hiding.

Mistakes in Speech and Malapropisms

Freud's idea of parapraxis, or Freudian slip, also includes malapropism, which are mistakes that happen when you use words that sound the same but are really different words. These mistakes could be the result of unconscious conflicts or desires. For instance, someone might mean to say "room" but instead say "doom," which makes people think of worry and anxiety. In this way, language can be seen as a way to express feelings that have been held back.

Language of Dreams

Freud stressed that dreams use a kind of "primary process" language that is very associative, symbolic,

and not linear. Dream language essentially expresses the cognitive patterns linked to the unconscious. Freudian dream work changes latent content into manifest content by condensing, displacing, and using symbols. The linguistic structure of the dream assists psychoanalysts in developing a theory for interpreting the desires and conflicts of the unconscious.

Repetition Compulsion in Speech

Freud's concept of repetition compulsion, the inclination to repeat behaviors, phrases, or patterns, is evident in language as well. We may unconsciously dwell on specific words, phrases, or expressions that indicate unresolved conflicts or repressed content. For example, using self-critical language over and over again could mean that we haven't dealt with our guilt or authority issues with our parents or parental figures.

Resistance

Freud observed that patients might unconsciously act to suppress the articulation of specific thoughts during therapy; they should, in most cases, consistently disclose themselves through language. This may manifest as hesitations, topic shifts, and/or the employment of ambiguous terminology (or a few words, or a concise phrase). He said in his book *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916–17): "Resistance shows itself in every variety of forgetting, in every error, in every avoidance of certain topics, and, in short, in every repression of painful ideas." This means that language is a place where unconscious defenses come out.

Speech Regression

Regression is when someone goes back to earlier stages of psychosexual development when they are stressed. For instance, in speech, regression can mean using childlike words, repeating phrases, or making things easier to understand. Freud addresses this in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), specifically indicating that regressive behaviors, including speech and communication, manifest when the ego perceives a threat.



Lapsus Linguae (Slip of the Tongue)

The lapsus linguae, or verbal slip, is a type of parapraxis that happens when the unconscious gets in the way of spoken language. Freud asserts in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901): "A slip of the tongue is not merely a trivial event; it signifies aspects of the origin and dynamics of the unconscious." This underscores the connection between unconscious desires and expressive language.

Verbal Cathexis

Freud used the idea of cathexis to talk about language itself, where energy is put into parts of speech, like phrases or stories. This is evident in instances of obsessive, poetic, or compulsive speech. Energy in speech reveals the fundamental motivations and the unconscious cathexis.

Humor and Wordplay

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud examined humor beyond mere puns (paronomasia), elucidating how comedic narratives reveal our repressed verbal frameworks, serving as secure conduits for the unconscious mind to identify and articulate behaviors, attitudes, and desires. Humor often employs double entendres, irony, or hyperbole, linguistic techniques typically used to obscure implicit ideational content within our subconscious.

Figurative Language in Dreams

Freud emphasizes repeatedly that dreams communicate in a metaphorical language. Symbols, metaphors, and complex images encode unconscious desires in a concealed linguistic manner (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900). To comprehend the unconscious, one must interpret this symbolic language.

Associative Chains

Freud's free association method relies significantly on associative chains, wherein one word prompts another, thereby uncovering unconscious connections. In *On the History of the Psycho-*

Analytic Movement (1914), he notes that these chains are not random. They show how language maps out the unconscious by showing hidden thoughts, wishes, and goals.

Misreading or Mishearing

Freud observed that unconscious conflicts could manifest in the misinterpretation of a text or the mishearing of spoken words. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), Freud provided examples where minor lapses in reading or hearing could unintentionally indicate repressed thoughts or anxiety.

Symbolic Substitution

Freud posited that, in both verbal expression and dreams, one word or image can supplant another, typically without conscious recognition. This is explained by both condensation and displacement, although it primarily emphasizes the substitutive functions of language. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), he wrote, "The dream-thoughts are expressed in symbols, and each symbol may replace several latent thoughts." In this way, language serves as a way to convey hidden meanings.

Paradoxical Expressions

Freud observed that individuals occasionally articulate sentiments contrary to their genuine emotions, a phenomenon frequently manifested in verbal irony, sarcasm, or jesting. In his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, he says that these kinds of contradictions let unwanted, repressed impulses come out while doing something that seems okay in public.

Misnaming objects or People

Freud often linked naming errors (incorrectly identifying a person or object) to unconscious desires or conflicts. He wrote in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901): "When one calls a person by the wrong name, it is rarely a coincidence; it is usually expressing a wish, a fear, or a reminiscence, somewhat unconsciously." This shows how language mistakes can have psychological meaning.



Ambiguity in Speech

Freud was interested in words or sentences that are not clear and can be understood in more than one way. He thought that being unclear was a good way for people to communicate without knowing it. It happens when people make mistakes, joke around, or write poetry. It shows how conscious intention and unconscious factors can be at odds with each other.

Linguistic Repetition

Freud observed that individuals occasionally unconsciously reiterate particular words or phrases in language, in addition to the phenomenon of repetition compulsion. This could mean that you have obsessive thoughts, unresolved conflicts, or desires that won't go away. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he connects patterns that repeat in language with drives that aren't fully satisfied.

Inhibition of Speech

Freud examined instances in which individuals cannot articulate their thoughts—manifested through pauses, stuttering, or word blockage. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), he linked these speech impediments to repression and internal conflict.

Tropes in Literature and Storytelling

Freud frequently analyzed literary texts (Shakespeare, Goethe, Sophocles) to demonstrate how the structure of language—encompassing metaphors, repetitions, and irony—reflects unconscious desires and conflicts. He asserted that language in literature functions analogously to dreams: symbolic, succinct, and often dislocated.

Forgetting (Memory Lapses)

In his 1901 book *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud points out that forgetting a name, an appointment, or a word has meaning: "Forgetting is often a means of avoidance, a defense against an idea that is distressing or unacceptable to consciousness." Everyday forgetting often shows that there is an unconscious conflict or a wish that has been pushed down.

Slip of Actions

Freud understood that mistakes made without thinking—like losing things or doing the wrong thing—could reveal motivations from the unconscious mind. In fact, these "mistakes" are important signs of hidden thoughts in our daily lives.

Acts of Obsession

In *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* (1909), Freud analyzed repetitive daily behaviors and rituals as manifestations of repressed anxieties, emphasizing that even trivial actions, such as repeatedly checking locks, indicated underlying bullying conflicts at the unconscious level.

Humor in Daily Life

Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) shows that everyday jokes are often a socially acceptable way to say what you really think and feel. People can safely express their feelings that are not allowed through wordplay, puns, and sarcasm.

Rituals and Beliefs

Freud noted that superstitious behaviors, rituals, and quotidian magical thinking expose unconscious fears and desires. Small, everyday things like knocking on wood or avoiding cracks can have symbolic meanings.

Work in Dreams

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud elucidates the process by which latent thoughts (unconscious desires) are converted into manifest content (the dream we recall). There are a few steps in dream work:

Condensation: Putting together several ideas into one symbol.

Displacement: Moving emotional intensity from things that matter to things that don't.

Symbolization: Using images or words to show hidden desires.

Secondary Revision: Making the dream make sense and be clear in waking memory. "The dream is the concealed realization of an inhibited desire."



Wish Fulfillment

People often have dreams that show them things they can't have in real life. Freud observes that even dreams that are disturbing or illogical signify the unconscious effort to realize a desire that remains unrecognized.

Day Residue

Freud acknowledged that aspects from the preceding day often infiltrated dreams, amalgamated with unconscious content. The elements in dreams that appear trivial and commonplace (a dialogue, a term, an item) may possess significant meaning.

Childhood Memories

Dreams often allude to experiences from early childhood. Freud demonstrates in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that early memories are frequently repressed but reemerge symbolically in adult dreams, indicating persistent unconscious conflicts.

Manifest and Latent Content

Dreams frequently integrate early childhood experiences. Freud illustrates in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that early memories are frequently repressed yet may resurface in adulthood via symbolic representation in dreams, signifying an ongoing unconscious conflict.

Language and Symbols in Dreams

Freud gave many examples of how dreams use everyday things, people, or actions to represent thoughts that are not conscious.

Houses → the body or self

Roads and paths are choices or directions in life.

Water → sexual desire or unconscious feeling

Dream language is symbolic, short, and connected, and it shows hidden desires.

Nightmares and Anxiety-Inducing Dreams

Freud associated anxiety dreams or nightmares with unresolved conflicts or feelings of guilt. These frequently signify repressed emotions striving to manifest in concealed forms.

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