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Overstandin: Upscaling reading positions and rescaling texts/signs

Abstract: Overstandin occurs when languagers upscale their reading positions to rescale the meanings of texts or signs according to their own intentions. While understanding is an important faculty for languagers and a central analytical category for applied linguistics research, it cannot fully grasp agency and creativity in complex languaging in postcolonial worlds. By focusing on processes of overstandin, this article shows how languagers assume an upscaled reading position from which they find opportunities to attack the form and function of a text/sign. Thereby they can destabilise the indexical equilibrium of a sign and show up the ambivalence of language. Understanding often erases this ambivalence. For this reason, the exposure of ambivalence through overstandin can be emancipative, especially in postcolonial thinking. I further argue that overstandin is emphasised in the dream-state – both conceptualised as a state of relative unconscious experiencing and a wish, desire, aspiration for an emancipated future. In the dream-state the signifier stands over the signified. Such processes of overstandin pose challenges to applied linguistics, which continues to rely on wake-state understanding as a central analytical category for its gaze and its methods and thereby reproduces hegemonic knowledge-power structures that have been put in place during Enlightenment, colonialism and current global modernities. This article suggests that an account of processes of overstandin as an agentive meaning-making of the epistemic hinterlands of the postcolonial, could rehabilitate ambivalence as an anthropological category for our discipline. My detour via dream-states is merely a rhetoric of the argument presented here and it should not be assumed that I suggest that applied linguists have to turn to mysticism or dream analysis in order to account for overstandin, scaling and indexical ambivalence. The oneiric rhetoric itself is an overstandin, which aims to challenge common-sense empiricism in our discipline.

Keywords: overstanding, ambivalence, understanding, sampling, dream, KRS-One, Lacan

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1 Introduction: Scales, attack, ambivalence, agency

People, people
We got to get over
Before we get under
– James Brown (1974) Funky President (People It's Bad)

How do we approach a text or sign? Do we stand *under* it, read it from a position of inferiority, expect its meaning to be encoded, even if hidden, somewhere within the text/sign? Or do we stand *over* it, taking a superior reading position and becoming agentive in determining what and how the text means? This article plays with the dynamics between *under*standing and *over*standin in order to formulate a scalar methodology for reading texts/signs and escape an overreliance on empiricism in applied linguistics, which to date does not adequately account for the inherent ambivalence of indexicality (Nakassis 2018). I propose an approach to reading texts/signs that is informed by a theorisation of sociolinguistic scales (Blommaert 2007, Blommaert 2015; this issue) and allows for an emancipative tactic to handle the complexities of contemporary sociolinguistic realities, both for languagers and analysts of languaging.

Overstandin is an upscaling of one's reading position. The reader of a text rejects the text's inherent meaningfulness, rather she recognises that the text is ambivalent and that she herself, with her entire complex subjectivity, determines what the text means. Metaphorically, we could say that she moves from standing under the text to standing over it. She becomes agentive and dominates the text and subjects its meaning to follow her own intentions. We all overstand, sometimes at least.

As discussed in some more detail below, Booth (1979) imagines overstandin to be an 'attack' on the text that reveals what the text has hoped to repress or hide. Such attacks on texts seem especially pertinent for an emancipative analysis of colonialism and European modernity. Bhabha (2004[1994]), for instance, makes a case for a third space of enunciation that, even though 'unrepresentable in itself', 'constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity, that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew' (Bhabha 2004[1994]: 55). This new reading, what Ortiz (1947) has termed neoculturation, emerges out of the violent and unequal encounter between colonised and colonisers and it destabilises the signs, texts and narratives that emanate from and circulate within the European project of modernity

(see also Pratt 1992; Mignolo 2000). The postcolonial subjectivity rejects that colonial texts are meaningful in any inherent way and offers subversive re-readings that might, so it is hoped, contribute to emancipation and freedom.

Overstandin might have some analytical purchase here. As a vertical meta-phor, overstandin allows us to imagine how common-sense understandings of scales of power can be overturned. '*We got to get over/Before we get under*' (Brown 1974). Moving from understanding to overstandin means to become aware of the fact that the colonial modern systems of power-knowledge, of which the academy is only the tip of the iceberg, offer you only restricted access to the 'real' meanings of the signs that are globally circulated (see also related discussions on indexical dissonance, linguistic anxiety and hypersubjectivity in Hall 2014; see also Blommaert 2005, Blommaert 2010 on truncated repertoires). Any attempt to understand colonial modernity will lead to the realisation that something of this knowledge is kept ambivalently hidden from you – because you are Black or Brown, perhaps, or Other in another way. What is more, the study of raciolinguistics has shown that *even if* a Black speaker gains access to the full set of forms and functions of such knowledge and articulates in 'correct' or 'appropriate' (i. e. their) manners, the White Ear will hear 'wrong' versions anyway (Flores and Rosa 2015) or it will try to specially legitimise and explain Black articulateness (Alim and Smitherman 2016). With this realisation in mind, the overstander feels no hesitation to position herself over the text or sign. She upscales her reading position to eventually attack the form and function of the text/sign and offer new and potentially emancipative rescalings.

In this article I trace two interconnected scaling practices of such overstandin of text/signs: upscaling and rescaling. First, the reading position of the languager is upscaled to position herself over the text/sign. In her superior positionality she discovers opportunities to attack one or various parts of the text and expose its ambivalence. In order to overstand, a languager could attack any part of a text: a sign's form or function, its signified, signifier, interpretant, representamen, object or its paradigmatic or syntagmatic situatedness in the historical structure of a language system. And as we will see in Lacan's Saussurean reading of Freud (or Freudian reading of Saussure), overstandin can also attack the bar that stands in between the signified and the signifier and represents them as separate orders.

This is where the second scaling practice – rescaling – becomes relevant. Once attacked, the one disfigured part of the text's/sign's meaning value will destabilise the indexical equilibrium of the entire text/sign, open up intertextual gaps and make it available for rescaling. The languager is now in a position to creatively reassemble the various disfigured parts of the text/sign and experiment with constructing new entailing meaning values, neocultures, which, as I will also argue, can become emancipative in a political sense.

In their most basic function, these two scaling practices are part and parcel of languagers' dialogism, their 'active reception' (Vološinov 1973: 117) or their 'actively responsive understanding' (Bakhtin 1986: 69) of the voices by which they are surrounded in the semiotic worlds they inhabit. Thus, when languaging, we are not merely responding in premediated ways to extant sociocultural language systems, but we are also constructing and entailing new contexts in order to navigate these systems meaningfully (Silverstein 2003, Silverstein 2013). Overstandin is this agentive dialectic of understanding.

In what follows I develop overstandin as an analytical concept for applied linguistics research. I first provide a brief overview of the history of overstandin as an approach to reading texts in various academic and folk disciplines. I then show the two interconnected scaling practices – upscaling and rescaling – by reviewing two texts, KRS-One's *Sound of da Police* and Lacan's *The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious*. Both texts problematise understanding; the usual focus in socially-sensitive language and communication research (for reviews see Taylor 1986; Dascal and Berenstein 1987; see also Spotti this volume). KRS-One and Lacan both engage in overstandin, first upscaling their subjectivity to stand over the text or sign, and from that superior position attacking the indexical equilibrium of the text/sign in question, pointing out its ambivalence and then rescaling the disfigured parts of the sign to make new, potentially emancipative, meanings. The reader, giving in to the authors' overstandin, equally, is forced to appreciate and respect the texts'/signs' ambivalence, cultural peculiarity and anti-hegemonic rootedness. But first, where does overstandin come from? Give credit where credit is due.

2 The etymology of overstandin[1]

The term 'overstanding' was coined among Rastafarians in Jamaica in the 1960s (Franke 2015). To indicate that the metropolitan English term 'understanding'

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1 I graphemically represent the final morpheme of this word as <in>, as opposed to a more standardised English representation of <ing>. This 'dropping' of the graphemic <g>, of course indexes an allophonic substitution from [ɪŋ] to [ɪn] in final '-ing' morphemes in multisyllabic words. With this I wish to index African American urban ways of speaking (Green 2002) and thereby situate and pay respect to the origins of the term (for a use of <in> in final morphemes in academic writing, see Smitherman 1977; Alim 2006). [n] is of course also commonly used across the English-speaking world in informal speech and it is typically used frequently by working-class male speakers (Trudgill 1972; Tagliamonte 2012: 187). By recognising the indexicalities and linguistic ideologies of this well-researched sociolinguistic variable, I use it for my

implies a positionality of inferiority and passivity, Rastafarians tinkered with the term and inverted it to 'overstandin', 'overstanding' or 'ovahstan'. The semiotic logics behind this semantic inversion are studied by Slade (2018). He shows that overstandings are particular word-formation processes in global Rastafarian language by means of which Babylonian, colonial forms (i. e. metropolitan English terms) are re-analysed and inverted into Zionic, postcolonial opposites. These overstandings include the term 'overstanding' itself (from understanding > {under} {standing}), but they comprise an entire set of morphological inversions, for example 'downpress' (from oppress > {up} {press}); 'apprecilove' (from appreciate > {appreci} {hate}); 'livicate' (dedicate > {dead} {icate}) or 'trubrary' (library > {lie} {brary}) and many more.

The creation of 'overstandin' rests on a folk etymology of the English word 'understanding' to comprise the two morphemes {under} and {standing} and to thus mean 'to stand under'. More generally, it rests on a widespread spatio-scalar metaphor that assigns prestige to concepts relating to top, high, up and over, and stigma to bottom, low, down and under (for a reading of these metaphors of spatial oppositions as sexualised and gendered cosmologies, see Bourdieu 2001: 7–22). For sure, the academically-trained philologist might be quick to identify the Rastafarians' folk etymology as a misinterpretation and point out that the prefix 'under-' in the word 'understanding' (Old English *understandan*) derives from the Proto-Indo-European root ***nter* which is theorised to mean 'in between' rather than 'under'. This is manifest in Sanskrit *antar*, Ancient Greek *entera* or Latin *inter*. Thus, the modern English word 'understanding' in fact comprises the morphemes {**nter*} and {standing} and means 'to stand in between' – like Saussure's bar that stands in between the signifier and the signified, as further explained below.[2]

Even if the expert's etymological analysis is accurate and scientifically valid, it might hold little purchase in the synchronic analysis of citizen sociolinguists (see Rymes and Smail, this volume). This is perhaps so because the prefix 'under-' in 'understanding' (deriving from **nter*) is homographic and homophonic with the very common English stand-alone word 'under' (with synonyms such as beneath, underneath, below, down, less than, inferior to etc.). This reading is supported by the fact that English and other languages also use 'under', in this meaning of below, as a prefix to semantically express inferiority: 'underclass', 'underdog', 'underachiever' and '*Untermensch*' are a few examples. In light of this common morphological practice, the Rastafarian folk reading of

2 Thank you, Tom, for making this link.

'understanding' to mean 'to stand under' and thus 'be inferior' is a valid synchronic suggestion.

Moreover, the postcolonial folk etymology is pertinently meaningful considering the sociohistorical context and unspeakable logics of the genocide, slave trade, plantation capitalism and white supremacy that were the economic backbone of the European colonisation of Jamaica, the Caribbean and the Americas at large. This history disqualifies any modern European knowledge (such as pointing to the 'actual' etymology of the term 'understanding') to be worthy of contributing to the emancipation of postcolonial subjects from the mental slavery that continues to subjugate Black people (see also Mignolo 2000; Shilliam 2015). 'None but ourselves can free our minds' said Marcus Garvey, quoted in Robert Nesta Marley's famous *Redemption Song* (1980), and it is in this spirit that overstandin becomes a significant strategy in the quest for postcolonial identity.

While overstandin became a signifier for a particular Rastafarian form of social emancipation in Jamaica, the term was taken up in the United States in the 1970s amongst early hip hop founding fathers and organic intellectuals like Afrika Bambaataa and it is now part of a universal jargon amongst practitioners of hip hop from all over the world. For example, Pichler and Williams (2016: 571–574) discuss the use of 'overstanding' as a Silversteinian cultural concept that evokes authenticity in the hip-hop talk of young, male, multi-ethnic Londoners. It can also be found in global Rastafarian cultures, as attested in Williams' (2016: 292) ethnographic discussion of the term used by Rastafarian herb sellers on an informal marketplace in South Africa, as well as in Slade's (2018) research into the virtual spaces of Rasta talk online.

But, overstanding is also used in semiotics and literary criticism (Booth 1979; Culler 1992) and theology (Sullivan 2007). Here it is deployed – without acknowledging its Rastafarian roots or recognising its etymology – to create critical reading positions for analysts that go beyond asking narrow questions about a text's meaning.

Sullivan (2007) maintains that what we usually regard as the modern scientific perspective of understanding (Kant's *Verstand*, Weber's *verstehen*) is in fact better conceptualised as overstanding. The modern reader is agentive and places herself above the text, as it were; analysing it, dissecting it, critiquing it, dominating it. Set in motion by the Enlightenment project and modern scientism, Sullivan argues, such overstanding leads to a misreading of religious texts, because the modern reader of the Bible stands over the word of God and thereby finds that its meaning is distorted, problematic, ambiguous or even nonsensical. A religious, believing reader, however, *under*stands by trusting that God reveals Himself in the text entirely and appropriately. Sullivan argues for a theology in which both overstanding and understanding are accepted as valid reading positions.

Arguing from a more profane perspective, Booth (1979) suggests that over-standing can tease out the plurality of meanings in a text. The critical reader's agency leads to an 'attack' (p. 243) on the text, which exposes the text's hidden hegemonic forms of false consciousness. Let's listen to Booth for some more context.

> [Understanding] works within a narrower domain than I thought, because I must recognize how often I myself insist on deliberate 'misreading' – that is, imposition of *my* questions – in order to *over*stand. It is still true that the violations we respect most will be based on a preliminary act of justice and understanding: I know what *you* want, you words there on the page (and now in my mind), implying as you do a community of norms and a sharing of goals. I have attended to you, I *understand* you – *and* I hereby repudiate, or correct, or deplore, or explain, or attack you in terms that you had either ignored or had hoped to repress. (Booth 1979: 242–243, original emphases)

In a similar vein, Culler (1992) stresses that overstanding is not the same as overinterpretation or misinterpretation. Culler notes that overstanding asks 'not what the work has in mind but what it forgets, not what it says but what it takes for granted' (p. 115). Texts are therefore always ambivalent and always available for new evaluations by critical readers, even long after their authors have died.

Also in less theoretical and more applied social science research overstanding has been used to complexify analysis. Sykes (2001) utilises Booth's discussion of overstanding to explore silence, absence and contradiction in narratives of lesbian Physical Education teachers in Canada. Similar to Sullivan, Sykes deploys both understanding and overstanding to bring about an analytical tension that allows her to 'dwell upon the categories "lesbian" and "heterosexual"; how "speech" and "silence" operated in spoken narratives; and discover not only "conscious" dynamics but also "unconscious" processes at play in the way we narrate ourselves into existence' (p. 18).

I will now turn to an analysis of two texts, in which dreamish authors overstand, attack and rescale signs. First, the lyrics of a popular hip hop song, KRS-One's (1993) *Sound of da Police*, illustrate how the rapper phonetically attacks the difference between two signifiers, 'officer' and 'overseer'. Thereby his experiences of police brutality as an African-American man in post-industrial New York City synchronise with the chronotope of slavery in the Americas. With the second text the analysis shifts the focus to a different, this time psychoanalytic, attack on signifier apartness in Lacan's (1966[1957]) essay *The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious*. Lacan proposes an inversion of Saussure's linguistic algorithm of the sign, signified over signifier, and argues for the signifierness of the unconscious – where the signifier stands over the signified.

3 Overseer ≈ Officer

As an initial example of overstandin I discuss verse 2 of KRS-One's (1993) song *Sound of da Police*. The song was a breakthrough in KRS-One's[3] career and is now part of the canon of hip hop classics. The song's iconic chorus (*Whoop whoop that's the sound of da police/Whoop whoop that's the sound of da beast*) with its onomatopoeic high-pitched mimicry of police sirens is widely known in hip hop circles and has been cited and sampled numerous times by other hip hop artists. Together with NWA's (1988) *Fuck tha Police* and Ice-T's (1992) *Cop Killer*, KRS-One's *Sound of da Police* emerges in the socio-political context of post-industrial urban America where police brutality especially against African American men was and continues to be a pressing social issue. The lyrics of these songs echo the rhetoric of the Black Panther Party in that they suggest that African American men have no other choice but to defend themselves and their communities; by all means necessary. It's called survival. In the following I reproduce the lyrics of the second verse of *Sound of da Police*. The music video is widely accessible online.

KRS-One (1993) *Sound of da Police* (verse 2)

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01      Now here's a likkle[4] truth, open up your eye
02      While you're checkin out the boom bap,[5] check the exercise
03  →   Take the word 'overseer', like a sample
04      Repeat it very quickly, in a crew for example
05  →   Overseer, overseer, overseer, overseer
06  →   Officer, officer, officer, officer, officer, officer
07      Yeah officer [comes] from overseer
08  →   You need a little clarity? Check the similarity!
09      The overseer rode around the plantation
10      The officer is off patrolling all the nation
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3 KRS-One (Lawrence 'Kris' Parker) has deciphered his stage name in many ways over the course of his career. Three readings recur. First, it is an acronym for Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over nearly everyone. Second, it is a shortened, hiphopifed version of his nickname Kris. Third, it represents the Indo-European syllable *kṛṣ*, meaning black, light and the anointed one, as in *Krishna* or *Christ*.

4 Jamaican Patwa 'little'.

5 The label 'boom bap' designates a simple, hard-hitting drum beat (boom bap boom boom bap) that has become the trademark of KRS-One's music and now also connotes underground hip hop music of the 1990s more generally. The album on which *Sound of da Police* appears is called *Return of the Boom Bap*.

11   The overseer could stop you what you're doin
12   The officer will pull you over just when he's pursuin
13   The overseer had the right to get ill [i. e. crazy]
14   And if you fought back, the overseer had the right to kill
15   The officer has the right to arrest
16   And if you fight back they put a hole in your chest!
17   Whoop! They both ride horses
18 →   After 400 years, I've got no choices!
19 →   The police them have a likkle gun
20 →   So when I'm on the streets, I walk around with a bigger one
21   Whoop whoop! I hear it all day
22   Just so that they can run their light, and be upon their way

KRS-One, who belongs to the Jamaican diaspora in New York City, uses Jamaican Patwa and African American English in the performance of his lyrics to build a historical continuity between slavery in the Americas and his own lived experience of police brutality in NYC. This chronotopic synchronisation (Blommaert 2005: 136) begins in lines 1 to 4, when the rapper addresses his audience directly and invites them to do a little semiotic exercise that will *open up your eye* (line 1). He invites his audience to play around with the signifier 'overseer' (an overseer was a guard who monitored the exploitative workflow on slave plantations and disciplined and punished insubordinate slaves). In line 3, he suggests that his audience should take the word 'overseer' and repeat it like a sample.

By utilising the notion of a sample, KRS highlights agency in languaging. A sample is a hip hop-inspired agentive and critical appropriation of semiotic objects for the means of articulating one's own intertextual voice (see also Bartlett 2004; Roth-Gordon 2009; Swiboda 2014; Williams 2017). This meaning is an extrapolation from the sample understood as a sound snippet, usually taken from an older vinyl record and recorded onto a sampling machine for hip hop music production. This technique allows a music producer to play back a sample in a loop or modulate and rearrange it to make hip hop beats (for a detailed study on the musical citationality of samplin, see Williams 2010). Most hip hop beats of the 1980s and 1990s used this samplin technique (see Schloss 2004) and many artists also ran into legal disputes about copyright infringement as samples were often used without clearing them (i. e. paying the label who owned the song from which a sample was lifted) (Schumacher 2004; Williams 2015).

When a sample is repeated very quickly it can sound like something else. Quick repetition of a sample partly conceals its source (Williams 2010) and it thereby leaves an intertextual gap (Briggs and Bauman 1992) that needs to be filled with indexical entailments for the sample to become meaningful. As KRS-

One demonstrates in lines 5 to 6, repeating the signifier 'overseer' [ovvəsɪə] very quickly like a sample blurs the signifier's difference to one of its neighbours in the phonological paradigma, namely 'officer' [ɒfɪsə]. The speed of repetition reduces the four-syllable word 'o.ver.se.er' to three syllables in 'of.fic.er' and triggers usual forms of phonological reduction, such as diphthong to monophthong ([oʊ] > [ɒ]; [ɪə] > [ə]) and voiced to unvoiced ([v] > [f]). When repeated very quickly, 'overseer' begins to sound like 'officer' (i. e. police officer). The rapid repetition creates a phonetic ambivalence that challenges the apartness of the two signifiers, which I notate as overseer ≈ officer, whereby the symbol '≈' is defined as 'approximately equal to'. If his audiences follow KRS-One's hip hop-inspired samplin and blurring of signifier apartness they open up an intertextual gap and begin with a new reading of the two signifieds; they begin to overstand police brutality as a continuation of the racist practices of slavery.

In the remainder of verse 2 the argument that the difference between the signifiers 'officer' and 'overseer' is ambivalent is explicitly translated onto the level of signifieds. The rapper announces that he will demonstrate that the two signifieds are similar: *You need a little clarity? Check the similarity!* (line 8). In lines 9–18, KRS-One provides descriptions of how the practices of police officers and plantation overseers are similar and *de facto* equivalent (see also Bucholtz and Hall 2005 on the semiotic process of adequation). He ends his verse by claiming that after 400 years of institutional racism he is left without choices (line 18), so that when out on the streets he always ensures he carries a gun that is bigger than the ones the police have (lines 19–20). The bigger size of his own gun is the moral of the story; at the end of the day, it all comes down to survival of the fittest in the concrete jungle. The bigger gun thereby works as a metaphor for KRS-One's dream of overturning the historical trauma of surviving slavery.

The phonetic blurring, accomplished through samplin, acts as a semiotic ground for a synchronisation of two chronotopes, which helps KRS-One to make an argument about the historical continuities of racism in the Americas. By challenging the apartness of the two signifiers, he sabotages a hegemonic reading position that understands police brutality against African American men as a fundamentally contemporary and local issue, a dehistoricised, peripheral problem that operates on a low scale of importance in the grand scheme of justice and peace that the police provide. In other words, in the hegemonic understanding instances of police brutality against African American men can be erased (in the sense of Irvine and Gal 2000) to uphold an image of the police as essentially good and necessary as an institution. By attacking the apartness of the signifiers, KRS-One situates police brutality within the wider historical context of slavery and thereby unveils the continued institutional injustice against Black people in the Americas. This is an argumentative rescaling in which larger

chronotopic scales are evoked to make lived experiences historically meaning-ful. This rescaling justifies the formulation of the moral of the story, when KRS-One says that he carries larger firearms than the police.

Regardless of whether or not one rejects the counter-ideologies promoted in the song *Sound of da Police*, what should be clear is that KRS-One's samplin creates an agentive positionality through which the overstandin of signs becomes possible and potentially emancipative. His overstandin teases out hidden mean-ing potentials that allow for historical re-readings of institutional racism and other oppressive systems. These hidden meanings do not operate on epistemic levels of wake-state understandings. They are only to be excavated through 'sampling sport' (Schumacher 2004), where rhythm, tempo, play, inversion, subversion, rupture and other creative forms of appropriative fragmentation and clever reas-sembly can create affective entailments and contextualisations. The meaning of the sample is necessarily different from the meaning of the original and this difference, as KRS-One shows, can be the entire purpose of the practice of samplin. Like the meaning of a dream, which is metaphoric, metonymic and transposed (discussed in the next section), and which is almost necessarily differ-ent from the meaning of wake-state experiencing, the meaning of the sample operates in an oneiric system of overstandin in which indexicality's ambivalence is foregrounded. The bigger gun that KRS-One claims to carry around out on the streets, then, can equally be seen as an oneiric metaphor for his rhyming tongue, his voice is a weapon that fights back, attacks – and kills if necessary.

Even without delving into a psychoanalysis of KRS-One as a postcolonial Oedipus of the paternalistic executive of the American state, we might recognise that samplin, like dreaming, can make unconscious or subconscious repressions or contradictions conscious. The analysis of samples and dreams stays ambiv-alent and inaccurate when the signs that come to the fore are taken at face value of wake-state understanding. In the wake-state analysis of the blurring of the signifiers 'officer' and 'overseer', we might smirk and accept that the words are similar but possibly reject that *because* of their phonetic similarity police brutal-ity is an extension of slavery. In such a wake state, the analyst, maybe like the father who laughingly accepts his toddlers half-knowing but yet intelligent pun, might *get* KRS-One's point but *reject* its logic. To explore our analytic minds, and overcome our fears, it might help to book a session with Lacan.

4 Signifier over signified $\frac{S}{s}$

Jacques Lacan is an enigmatic white thinker of French structuralism. He worked as a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, writer and became a highly influential, though

also controversial, figure in Parisian intellectual life in the mid-twentieth century. His seminal essay *The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud* is a written-up seminar he gave in the Sorbonne in 1957 to a group of psychoanalysts. It appears in its English translation in a collection entitled *Écrits* (1966). The essay, like much of Lacan's written work, is complex, baffling and almost impossible to understand in any singular way. In my several readings of the text – some of them partial readings, others complete, some half awake, others half asleep – different aspects of Lacan's theory came to the fore. The meaning of Lacan's essay, I therefore assume, rests heavily on the reader's reading position, her disciplinary background and her momentary research (or other) interests. In that, the text presents itself as a diagrammatical icon of the point it is trying to make: language is ambivalent.

Lacan argues that Saussurean linguistics can inform the Freudian analysis of the unconscious. The structural analysis of *langue*, with Saussure's (1959[1916]) theory of the sign as its centrepiece, is applied to a psychoanalytic reading of dreams, as spelled out in Freud's (1955[1900]) *Interpretation of Dreams*, in which 'Freud intends to give us nothing other than the laws of the unconscious in their broadest extension' (Lacan 1966: 514). Thus, Lacan understands dreams as linguistic representations of the laws of the unconscious, which rebuffs 'the idea that the unconscious is merely the seat of instincts' (p. 495).

Lacan maintains that the semiotic laws of *langue* have to be inverted when applied to an analysis of the unconscious, since signs are always transposed or disfigured (what Freud called *entstellt*) when they appear in a dream. In the unconscious, Lacan argues, we observe 'an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' (pp. 503; 511), so that the signifier (S) stands over the signified (*s*), which he notates as:

$$\frac{S}{s}$$

Lacan explains that this notation 'is read as follows: signifier over signified, "over" corresponding to the bar separating the two level' (p. 497). Lacan offers another simple depiction (Figure 1) to further illustrate his point. We instantly recognise that Lacan's depiction (Figure 1) is an *inverted* version of Saussure's famous diagram of the linguistic sign (Figure 2).

What's the difference? Lacan's inversion seems trivial, especially because Saussure's two arrows pointing up and down already suggest that it is the relationship *(rapport)* between signifier and signified that is at stake (Saussure 1959[1916]: 74–76), not their intrinsic position in the model, and that this relationship is largely arbitrary (pp. 67–70). Does it really matter from which

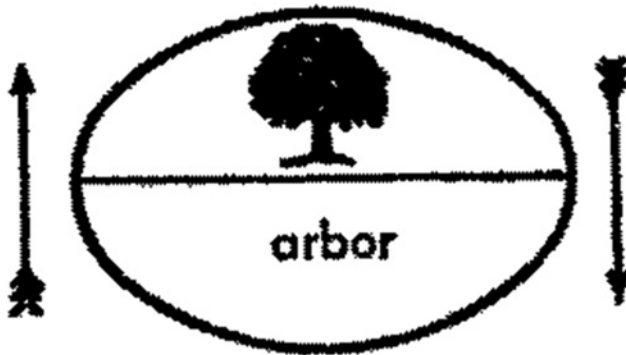**Figure 1:** The sign *tree* (Lacan 1966: 499).

Figure 2: The sign *tree* (Saussure 1959[1916]: 67).

vantage point to look at the sign? I don't think so, from my reading of both Lacan and Saussure.

What's going on here? I think, what Lacan *does* achieve with his inversion is an attack on the primordial separation – the bar – between signifier and signified. The signified's 'sliding' under the signifier attacks, and thereby punctures, fractures, or even breaks, the bar that separates the two sides of the sign. Lacan even goes so far as to psychoanalyse Saussure himself, by mentioning, in passing, that Saussure must have chosen the example of tree, *arbre* in French, because it is an anagram of *barre*, the bar that is ignored in the Saussurean

algorithm apart from its function to separate the orders of signified and signifier (p. 503). Lacan writes that 'the major theme of this science [linguistics] is thus based on the primordial position of the signifier and the signified as distinct orders initially separated by a barrier resisting signification' (p. 497). It is thus the bar that is at the heart of the Saussurean structuralist analysis of difference, however, the meaning of the bar itself is ambivalent: the difference between signifier and signified is devoid of meaning.

The aperture in the bar that Lacan suggests with his notion of the signified 'sliding under' the signifier, allows the signifier to take on the superior position determining the meaning of the sign. In his discussion of the chain of signifiers, Lacan argues that it is *only* in the signifier-to-signifier relationship that we find meaning; rather than in the relationship between entire signs as Saussure suggested (on related discussions on empty signifiers, see also Laclau 1996). In the analysis of dreams especially and in fact in all 'unconscious' use of language, Lacan argues, we can observe what he calls the *signifierness of the unconscious*.

To account for the signifierness of the unconscious, Lacan brings together Jakobson and Halle's (1956) discussion of metaphor and metonymy and Freud's (1955[1900]) discussion of dream-work (*Traumarbeit*). Lacan says that the signs that appear in dreams, are metonymically displaced (Freud's *Verschiebung*) and metaphorically condensed (Freud's *Verdichtung)*, in short, they are transposed or disfigured (Freud's *Entstellung*) (Lacan 1966: 511). Like with reading hieroglyphics, 'dream images are to be taken up only on the basis of their value as signifiers, that is, only insofar as they allow us to spell out the "proverb" presented by the oneiric rebus' (p. 510). The riddle or rebus that dream images pose to us can never be simply understood by the letter, literally, in the *verbum*, but they always 'stand for' something else, they are *pro*verbial, we would say indexical nowadays, and they thus require a languager's active reception or overstandin in order to gain meaning. By actively receiving, perhaps with the help of a psychoanalyst, we might begin to reassemble the indexicality that has been disfigured by the signifierness and perhaps start to understand the meaning of our dreams and acquaint ourselves with the general workings of our unconscious.

For example, imagine you repeatedly dream of a boat on a house (Freud 1955[1900]: Chapter 6) or of a tree. When you wake up from your dream, you will realise that these dream images are highly ambivalent: like hieroglyphics they are not what they seem at first glance but rather they are metonyms or metaphors that stand for or point to something else in your life. They are disfigured indexes of larger and more hidden issues of your social psyche, to be discussed perhaps with a psychoanalyst (for a list of possibilities of what 'tree' could index

in a dream, for instance the letter Y and the shadow of a cross on a barren hill, see Lacan 1966: 504).[6] The point is, simply, that you – and only you, not the psychoanalyst, not the empathetically listening friend, not your linguistic community – are the active part in the interpretation, evaluation and understanding of the highly ambivalent dream image. Only you can decode its meaning and make it relevant to your life. To showcase your agency to the friend, psychoanalyst or other audience, perhaps, you find yourself in a position to index the indexical ambivalence of the dream image itself and show up its metonymic and metaphorical disfigurement. This attack on the sign or on one of its elements positions yourself, your intention, your desire for immediacy (Nakassis 2018), *over* the meaning of the oneiric sign. In the interpretation of the dream, you upscale your reading position; i. e. you overstand.

5 Discussion and conclusion: Discomfort

How often do we overstand the texts/signs we encounter in our lives, in our dreams, in our desires, in our professional work? How often does our wake-state rationality erase such overstandin as soon as we catch ourselves doing it? Why do we disregard overstandin as nonsensical or peripheral to our lives? You are reading this article in an academic journal, therefore you and I have probably been trained to believe in empiricism, facts, logic and other Enlightenment predicaments of European modernity. We have been schooled to read and write in a clear fashion and spell out our arguments in ways that they do not seem ambivalent. We cultivate such clear understanding in order to come across as educated and try and make a career. Perhaps, even, our education has made us disbelieve in magic, spirituality and religion. We are tough nuts to crack and it is likely that we will go back to analysing our texts/signs – private and professional ones – with an emphasis on wake-state understanding, even if we somehow accept some aspects of overstandin that I spelled out in this article. I will surely do so; not without discomfort though.

It has to be recognised that both authors I reviewed in this article attack signs and thereby challenge wake-state understanding. They dream. KRS-One uses the logics of samplin to blur the phonetic apartness between the signifiers 'overseer' [oʊvəsɪə] and 'officer' [ɒfɪsə] and thereby synchronises police brutality in post-industrial New York City with the institution of slavery in the Americas

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6 In the awake world of cultural life also, a tree could be used as an empty signifier (Laclau 1996), for instance by a political party who has a dream, to evoke environmentalism, recycling, growth, even life, or similar ideas organised under the discourse of nature.

(overseer ≈ officer). Lacan brings together Freud's interpretation of dreams and Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign to arrive at a reading of the letter in the unconscious, in which the signifier stands over the signified, attacking the bar that separates the two realms of the sign $(\frac{S}{s})$. Thus, overstandin seems to become significant in the dream-state – both conceptualised as a state of relative unconscious experiencing and a wish, desire, aspiration for an emancipated future. In the dream-state, perhaps counterintuitively, languagers' dialogic agency of responding to, attacking and creatively reassembling signs is increased. The oneiric disfigurement of the sign affords the dreaming and samplin languager multiple opportunities to show up the sign's indexical ambivalence, attack and rescale sign forms and meanings and recirculate new meanings.

My efforts to imagine overstandin as the agentive dialectic of understanding were perhaps nothing more than a little conceptual exercise to break free from the spells of reason and wake-state empiricism that too often reproduce colonial knowledge systems and disregard dreaming languagers' overstandin as 'folk theories' or plain nonsense. Perhaps you call such overstandin by other names, Southern Theory maybe, but I believe that the vertical spatial metaphors 'under' and 'over' work well as a heuristic to apply sociolinguistic scales in postcolonial thinking. In my engagements with KRS-One's and Lacan's texts, I spelled out a few fragmented ideas that might become informative for future theoretical considerations in semiotics, indexicality and scale research and perhaps even dream analysis. But the overall takeaway from my work is, I believe, of applied and anthropological nature. I hope to have invited my academic colleagues with so-called real-life and political concerns to cultivate a feeling of general discomfort when it comes to applying common wake-state types of understanding to an analysis of languaging. Let us stop erasing folk theories and concealing our analytic uncertainties to construct languages. Let us instead acknowledge the complexity and inherent ambivalence of languaging.

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