

## Displacement

Such a hypothesis reaches full development with Freud's model of the functioning of the 'neuronal apparatus' in his 'Project for a Scientific Psychology' (1950a [1895]): the 'quantity' is displaced along pathways made up of neurones which tend towards a complete discharge only, in accordance with the 'principle of neuronal inertia'. The 'total or primary' process is defined by a displacement of the whole of the energy from one idea to another. So, in the formation of a symptom—that is, of a 'mnemic symbol'\* of the hysteric type—'only the distribution [of the quantity] has changed. Something has been added to [the ideal] A which has been subtracted from B. The pathological process is one of *displacement*, such as we have come to know in dreams—a primary process therefore' (3a).

Displacement is also to be observed in the secondary process\*, but here its range is limited and it only involves small quantities of energy (3b).

From the psychological point of view, an apparent vacillation on Freud's part is noticeable as regards the extension that should be given to the term 'displacement'. At times he contrasts displacement and conversion\*: the phenomenon of *displacement* occurs between different ideas, and is more especially characteristic of obsessional neurosis (cf. Freud's term '*Verschiebungssatz*'—the formation of a substitute by means of displacement); in *conversion*, on the other hand, the affect is eliminated and the cathectic energy changes key by passing from the realm of ideas to the somatic realm (2b). At other times, displacement would appear to be a general characteristic of all symptom-formation: '... by means of extreme displacement [satisfaction] can be restricted to one small detail of the entire libidinal complex' (4a); to this extent, therefore, conversion itself implies a displacement as, for example, in the case of the displacement of genital pleasure to some other part of the body (4b).

b. It was especially in dreams that Freud demonstrated the function of displacement. The comparison of the manifest content of the dream with the latent dream-thoughts reveals that their focus differs: the most important elements of the latent content are represented by insignificant details, which are either recent (and often indifferent) events or else long-past events which have already been the object of a displacement in childhood. From this descriptive standpoint, Freud is led to make a distinction between dreams which do and dreams which do not involve displacement (5a). In the latter, 'the different elements were able to retain during the process of constructing the dream the approximate place which they occupied in the dream-thoughts' (5b). Such a distinction may appear surprising to those who wish to follow Freud in maintaining that the characteristic mode of operation of unconscious mental processes is *free displacement*. In point of fact, Freud does not deny that displacements may affect each element of a dream: but in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a) he usually employs the term 'transference' to designate, in the most general sense, the transposition of psychical energy from one idea to another; 'displacement' he uses rather to refer to a descriptively striking phenomenon, more noticeable in some dreams than in others, whose upshot is the shift in focus of the whole emphasis of the dream which he calls 'the transvaluation of psychical values' (6).

In the analysis of dreams, displacement is closely connected with the other mechanisms of the dream-work\*. First, it facilitates condensation\* in so far as

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displacement along two chains of associations leads eventually to ideas or verbal expressions formed at the intersection of the two paths. Represent-ability\* too is made easier when a transition is effected, through displacement, between an abstract idea and an equivalent lending itself to visualisation; in this way psychical interest is transformed into sensory intensity. Lastly, secondary elaboration\* pursues the work of displacement by subordinating it to its own ends.

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Displacement has a clearly defensive function in the various formations in which the analyst encounters it: in a phobia, for instance, displacement on to the phobic object permits the objectivation, localisation and containment of anxiety. In dreams, the relation between displacement and the censorship\* is such that the former may appear to be the result of the latter: '*Is jecit cui profuit*. We may assume, then, that dream-displacement comes about through the influence of the same censorship—that is, the censorship of endopsychic defence' (5c). Essentially, however, displacement—in so far as it may be conceived of as operating freely—remains the surest sign of the primary process: 'The cathectic intensities [in the Ucs.] are much more mobile. By the process of *displacement* one idea may surrender to another its whole quota of cathexis' (7). Moreover, these two theses are not really in contradiction with one another, for the censorship does not *provoke* displacement save inasmuch as it represses certain preconscious ideas which, by being drawn into the unconscious, fall under the domination of the laws of the primary process. The censorship uses the mechanism of displacement for promoting ideas which are indifferent, transient, or susceptible of integration into associative contexts very far removed from the defensive conflict, to a privileged position.

The term 'displacement' does not for Freud imply the singling out of any particular type of associative connection—such as association by contiguity or association by similarity—as characteristic of the chain along which the process of displacement operates. The linguist Roman Jakobson has, however, felt justified in correlating the unconscious mechanisms described by Freud and the rhetorical procedures of metaphor and metonymy, which he holds to be the two fundamental poles of all language; he thus brings displacement together with metonymy, in which association is based upon contiguity, while he sees symbolism as corresponding to the metaphoric dimension which is governed by the law of association by similarity (8). Jacques Lacan has taken up these suggestions and developed them, assimilating displacement to metonymy and condensation to metaphor (9); for Lacan, human desire\* is structured fundamentally by the laws of the unconscious, and its nature is metonymic *par excellence*.

(1) Cf. FREUD, S. Letter to Josef Breuer dated June 29, 1892, G.W., XVII, 3-6; S.F., I, 147-8.

(2) FREUD, S. 'The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence' (1894a): a) G.W., I, 74; S.F., III, 60; b) G.W., I, 59-72; S.E., III, 45-58.

(3) FREUD, S.: a) *ibid.*, 429; S.E., I, 350; b) *ibid.*, 446 ff.; S.E., I, 366 ff.

(4) FREUD, S. *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* (1916-17): a) G.W., XI, 381; S.E., XVI, 366; b) G.W., XI, 336; S.E., XVI, 324-25.