



Fig. 1—*Paradigm Shift* is a painting by Roz Abellera (2013). The ambition of wanting to contain everything concerning a subject matter in an image, triggers an oppositional logic in relation to other facets than the imaginary of the given subject matter: such as the real and the symbolic. Characteristically, such attempts never succeed entirely.

A shifter is not a symbol, but a category of sign that is *such that it stands for one thing at the time*: in other words, what it determines shifts in function of meanings that are formed by other means. It is an empty sign, but yet a communicative affordance. *I, this, there, here, you*: in linguistic terms, *pronouns*. Terms with a shifting reference. They are semiotically related to the index. In other words, they are indicators. They do not stand for something else by definition, but for the moment. So, every single instance of reference to a particular term, is a *shifter* indicating a concept.

In these few sentences about we have moved from linguistics to art. For some readers this will be too quick, and for good reasons, as the hatching of shifters appears to be the work of time, since their domain is passing, what passes, what passes on. The notion of shifters thereby are expected to cover the whole realm from changes of time, to changes in time (Wallerstein): from our exchanges with time, to the occurrence of events. In the literature about shifters—ranging from [Jespersen](#), [Jacobson](#), [Krauss](#) and [Robinson](#)—we also pass *from* linguistics to *art*.

It starts with Jacobson's discussion of Jespersen's work: "The general meaning of a shifter cannot be defined without reference to the message." The medium is *not* the message, the media are the *shifters*. Which is, of course, why the connection from linguistics to art is defining. "[...] Shifters combine both functions and belong therefore to the class of INDEXICAL SYMBOLS." And then: "In fact, shifters are distinct from all other constituents of the linguistic code solely by their compulsory reference to the given message." Jacobson did his bit by attempting to formalise this.

(C = code; M = message; / = referring to): "*Jim told me 'flicks' means 'movies'*. This brief utterance contains all four types of duplex structures: reported speech (M/M), the auto-nymous form of speech (M/C), a proper name (C/C) and shifters (C/M), namely the first person pronoun and the preterit, signalling an event prior to the delivery of the message. In language and in the use of language, duplicity plays a cardinal role, in particular the classification of grammatical, especially verbal, categories requires a consistent discrimination of shifters." Then he writes of the intricacies of Russian.

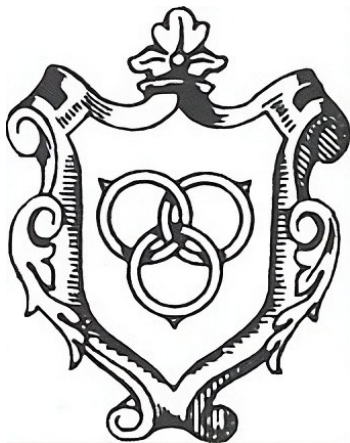


Fig. 2—the Borromeo family crests (as is common in heraldics, the crest is one several versions and variants—this particular one, however, corresponds with Jacques Lacan's reference, when inventing the Borromean knot

Rosalind Krauss writes: "The shifter is Jakobson's term for that category of linguistic sign which is "filled with signification" only because it is "empty." 3 The word 'this' is such a sign, waiting each time it is invoked for its referent to be supplied. "This chair," "this table," or "this . . ." and we point to something lying on the desk. "Not that, this," we say. The personal pronouns 'I' and 'you' are also shifters. As we speak to one another, both of us using 'I' and 'you', the referents of those words keep changing places across the space of our conversation. I am the referent of 'I' only when I am the one who is speaking. When it is your turn, it belongs to you."

The she proceeds to opposition: "5. This opposition between the Symbolic and the Imaginary leads us to a further comment on the shifter. For the shifter is a case of linguistic sign which partakes of the symbol even while it shares the features of something else. The pronouns are part of the symbolic code of language insofar as they

are arbitrary: 'I' we say in English, but 'je' in French, 'ego' in Latin, 'ich' in German . . . But insofar as their meaning depends on the existential presence of a given speaker, the pronouns (as is true of the other shifters) announce themselves as belonging to a different type of sign: the kind that is termed the index." The notion of opposition Krauss refers to Lacan. Further on she writes:

"Following the designation of spoken or written language as constituted of that type of sign called the symbol, Lacan names this stage of development the Symbolic and opposes it to the Imaginary." But does he really oppose them, given that the third constitutive element is the real, which Lacan conceives in the triangle: the symbolic, the imaginary and the real? They are contrastive, yes, *but* oppositional? Given that we can assign the three like this: **1)** the real btw. *difference* and the other; **2)** the symbolic btw. *similar* and *different*; **3)** the imaginary btw. *same* and *similar*.

Which means that we can define the triangle—what Lacan calls the Borromean knot—to the foursquare categories of the *same*, the *similar*, the *different* and the *other*. If opposition was introduced for the purposes of amplification, it does not apply here. Indeed, the theory of shifters relating to *indexical-symbol-events* (which connects meaning to emergence and salience) the amplification does not require opposition, because it is achieved by other means. As when we define the shifter as the resident of another [knot](#): *lalangue*, *objet petit a* and the *sinthome*.

That is, language on the verge of meaning (*lalangue*), identity as short-circuited desire (*objet petit a*) and the trauma of birth that we learn to live with (*sinthome*). The shifter being rooted in this unstable compound which is constantly affected by the things we do/not do, the exchanges we enter with one another, and what happens in the world. It cannot be entirely coincidental that the story of the name *Borromean* in the 'Borromean knot' comes from the coat of arms of the Borromeo family: a crest with 3 annular circles, which is not merely conceived as a [Venn Diagram](#).

With the [Borromeo family-crest](#) we will *imagine* the [Borromeo-family](#), consider the coat of arms as a *symbol* of its power, and connect to the *real* events that revealed its twists & turns. The elements of the knot clearly belong, though they *never* collapse *nor* completely coincide. Which means that they are contrastive (but not opposite). Krauss' pledge to opposition seems to derived from her errands with the Klein's group: from the mathematician Felix Klein, whose [group](#)—defined as a term, its opposite and their inversions—was brought to structuralism by [Claude Lévi-Strauss](#),

However, the point Krauss makes of the role of the shifter in the attribution of names to a self (which might rather be the ego) and the certainty connection between language and its contents—both at which are eroded in autism—remains of core interest. For instance, unsecuring the relation between name and self/language and contents and moving it to be established in novel terms, is arguably the core of artistic creation: here the shifters are caught in a phase-shift. Paintings can be understood as empty signs, she states, that are filled with meaning by an object.

Julia Robinson's analysis of the transition from abstraction in painting to event-models in conceptual art—featuring in George Brecht's event score-cards (*Water Yam*)—takes over in the wake of Rosalind Krauss' work on shifters: the indexicality the object happening, such as a black chair, and the linguistic notion of the chair. That is, the linguistic notion happening. Which means that the shifter—featuring a the event of a random object—is a *presentational* (rather than a representational) semiotic category, or sign. Which covers its incidence in language and in artefacts.

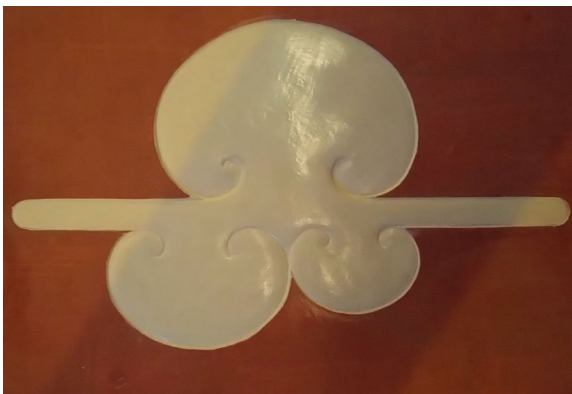


Fig. 3—Detail from Bjørn Blikstad's *Selvskap* (Eng Selfhood) 2023. The counterpoint of the *image* features in the humbler expression of the same idea in the *object*, or object-symbol. Neither close in on themselves since neither the image nor the symbol makes claims to encompass the real, but rather points to it. Which is one aspect of the shifter that is obliterated in the event score cards

An interesting turn took place with photo-research librarian and artist Harald Østgaard Lund's domestic work: in his reenactment of George Brecht's [Water Yam](#) June 3<sup>rd</sup> at his Oslo address in Langmyrgrenda 51b, he combined Brecht's cards with a score by John Cage: [Variations IV for any number of players, any sounds or combinations of sounds](#) (Editions Peters), which he juxtaposed from the city-planning office's regulation map for his property. Was it an act, or a performance: Lund featured George Brecht, while von der Lippe did David Tudor. But was it present-ational or representational. We were left with a choice: to consider the two play-acting Brecht and Tudor, or offering something that the act affords but performance can deny: namely, the presentation of the site, and a unique site at the border to a [forest](#).