Legitimating and Naturalizing Binary Oppositions in European-Centric System: East and Telling Fortune by Coffee Grounds

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Abstract

System that living in is mostly constructed through binary oppositions which based on European centric knowledge. Within this system the East, which refers to the Islamic world, despite of resisting to be placed as secondary; normalized and naturalized this manipulated 'reality' within some of its cultural characteristics. Telling fortunes by coffee grounds can be the one of these characteristics. Coffee fit to the Eastern countries by the diffusion of the Islam. It is originally part of the Arabic countries, then adapted to the others such as Turkish culture by interaction with them and accepting Islam. During the present study 'telling fortune by coffee grounds' and the meanings of the signs with the meanings that they bear will be analysed. While doing this, interrelation between legitimating being secondary in the European centric knowledge and the signs that are given meaning to in this type of fortune-telling will be figured out. Giving meanings to those signs are closely related to feeling as secondary and legitimating this within themselves is going to be assumed during the presents study.
Key words: Culture, European-centric knowledge, fortune-telling

1. INTRODUCTION: COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE RELATION

Human being, which can be defined as social and cultural beings, differentiate from other alive and non-alive beings with their ability to communicate so living as community and constructing a cultural structure. In order to construct their own society and culture they need to be good at communicating. There are several definitions of communication. In basic they can be categorized as mainstream definition and critical definitions of communication. Fiske (1990:1) explained communication is as «talking to one another, it is television, it is spreading information, it is our hairstyle, it is literary criticism: the list is endless». However it is defined, it is important not to forget that communication is the two-way activity not the flow of information from one way. Feedback is one of the primary necessities of effective communication. For effective communication a fully common understanding between two (or more) people is essential. Sender, message, channel/medium, receiver and feedback are the basic components of communication. In other words it is necessary to answer 5 W + 1H to be able to talk about proper knowledge: who said, what, when, where, why and how it is said/ perceived should be clarified. One of the scholars defined communication as:

> *Any act by which one person gives to or receives from another person information about*
> *that person's needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge, or affective states. Communication*
> *may be intentional or unintentional, may involve conventional or unconventional signals,*
> *may take linguistic or non-linguistic forms, and may occur through spoken or other modes*
> (Valenzuela, J. S. 1992:2)

However as Fiske also mentioned we need to keep in mind that «all communication involved signs and codes» (1990:1). He explained signs as «artefacts or acts that refer to something other than themselves» and codes as «systems into which signs are organized and which determine how signs may be related to each other» (Fiske, 1990:1). Interpretation of the signs, construction of their meaning and the system that they are involved are in close relation with the culture that they belong to. In other words, signs and their interpretations may differ from culture to culture. Signs as Fiske also mentioned are involved in the process of communication, therefore it is possible to assume that the way that they are constructed and read are closely related with the given meaning to the culture that is involved.

Culture is «learned and shared human patterns or models for living; day- to-day living patterns. these patterns and models pervade all aspects of human social interaction. Culture is mankind's primary adaptive mechanism» (Damen, L. 1987:367). Therefore, from birth to death human being learn and share some patterns in order to survive as well as keep being a socio-cultural beings. It is closely related with sharing understanding, perceiving and interpreting via communicating. As Lederach, J.P. (1995:9) also claimed culture can be defined as «the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them». In addition to this Linton (1945) insisted that the culture is a constellation of learned demeanour and results of them whose constituent factors are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society. Therefore signs which are parts of particular culture and meanings that are given to them are closely related with the

culture that is shared by members of that society. These signs can also be accepted as the indicator and signifier of the characteristics of cultures an societies. Thus significant point is the method of reading and interpreting those indicators to get brief information about the members of the culture/ society. The process of reading, interpreting and understanding codes of signs are closely related with the process of communication. As it is mentioned before communication enables people to understand and to be understood. While talking about communication, both verbal and non-verbal communication is intended.

In the process of communication, 'decoding' and 'encoding' factors are the simplest terms which explains perceiving and interpreting the signs. Each sign can be encoded and decoded, thus receivers convert sign to reasonable and meaningful messages. Fiske (1990) mentioned semiotic school explains communication as production and chance of meanings. He stated that semiotic school concerns with «how messages, or texts, interact with people in order to produce meanings» (p. 2), in other words it deals with the role of texts in culture. Text is not necessarily the written material but every single thing that can bear meaning.

2. WHO WE ARE: BINARY OPPOSITIONS

Binary oppositions, which is concept in structuralism, explains the generation of meaning in sign by reference to two basic states in which the elements within the system can exist. They structure perception and interpretation of both of the natural and social worlds (Edgar, A. & Sedgwick, P. R. 2002). Fiske (1990) explained binary oppositions as the structure of the heart of the process of Levi-Strauss's paradigmatic dimension of knowledge. He explained this system as a system of two related categories which are opposed to each other. Through this every single thing is belong to either A category or B. However the significant point here is that A cannot exist on its own as well as B; but they can only exist in relationship with each other. As Fiske (1990) mentioned according to Strauss this system comprises the universe.

Jakobsen (1998) mentioned that binary oppositions are one of the main discourses to constitute social differentiation as hierarchy and domination. She insists that domination also produced,maintained and may be legitimated via discourses.

As mentioned before giving meanings to signs and interpreting them is directly relate with the cultural structure of the system that is involved. Lacey (1998)claimed that binary oppositions as well as other sign systems are cultural creations rather than natural descriptions. These cultural creation as well as defining every single sign that exist, define ourselves. In other words, we born in a world which is already culturally created and explained. Within the system just we born in, we already born with the destiny of being one category either A or B.

During the present study, East and West categories will be explored as category A and B. East is going to be defined as the one who is not West and 'religion' will handled as the indicator of this categorization. In other words, Christian Countries will be handled as West while Muslim countries will be categorized as East. While doing this, some other peculiarities which are given to West and East will be underlined.

Binary oppositions mostly studied at gender and ethnic studies. Therefore, some cues from those studies will be adopted to the present one. Being male, white, Christian and rich

will be categorized as the peculiarity of West ; being female, black, Muslim and poor will be assumed as the characteristics of the East. While doing this, how each category legitimate its own existence and characteristics by naturalizing them will be pointed out.

The main discussion in the present study is based on defining one category while defining its 'Other'. Hall (1996) claimed that 'West' concept represent very complex ideas and do not refer to a single meaning. He stated that this concept may refer to two meanings; one is location or that is to say geography and the second one is level of society and development. Through this he insisted that the West «is no longer only in Europe, and not all of Europe is in the West» (p.185). He added that «the meaning of this term is therefore virtually identical to that of the word «modern»» (p. 186). The author, specified four functions as the concept of 'the West' that can seen to. According to these functions, first of all the idea of 'the West' allows us to characterize societies into antithetical categories like western and non-western. Secondly, it is such an image that functions as a part of language and a system of representation. Thirdly, as Hall (1996) mentioned, the idea of West provides a standard of comparison and helps to explain difference. Finally as a forth function the author stated

> ... it provides criteria of evaluation against which other societies are ranked and around which powerful positive an negative feelings cluster. («the West»= developed = good = desirable ; or the «non-West»= under-developed = bad = undesirable). It produces a certain kind of knowledge about a subject an certain attitudes towards it. In short, it functions as an ideology. (Hall, 1996:186).

Therefore, the concept of «West» refers to some ideological classification. As Hall also claimed «the West» bears all the positive, progressive, secular and modern meanings. The one which is classified as the «West», either directly or indirectly bears the 'positive' characteristics of the 'Western' countries.

During the present study within the non-Western countries the one which is assumed as 'the East' will be investigated as the one who naturalizes and normalizes the antagonism to be deemed as 'secondary'. The reason of defining as secondary is assuming the 'West' as function of ideology. Eagleton(1994) listed some meaning of ideology in order to clarify variety of its meaning. Through this he said that it is

> *(a) the process of production of meanings, signs an values in social life; (b) a body of ideas characteristics of a particular social group or class; (c) ideas which help to legitimate a dominant power; (d) false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; (e) systematically distorted communication; (f) that which offers a position for a subject; (g) forms of thought motivated by social interests; (h)identity thinking; (i) socially necessary illusion; (j) the conjuncture of discourse and power; (k) the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world; (l)action-oriented sets of beliefs; (m) the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality; (n) semiotic closure; (o) the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure (p) the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality (pp.1-2).*

In other words, it is possible to assume that ideology which refers to a system of beliefs and ideas of a particular group is forming and formed by power relations. Therefore it is essential to deal with power relations and how they legitimate their superiority. Of course it is not possible to talk about a single method but culture and discourses can be one of the primary factors. Discourses cannot be investigated independently from the culture which it is covered by. Van Dijk (1997) stated that discourse is a form of language but discourse analysts deal with who uses this language, why, when and how. Human beings, who are defined as social and cultural beings above, can not be freed from the influence of the culture that they belong to. Thus it is possible to claim that discourses which are type of cultural reflectors, are constructed, diffused, reconstructed and exchanged by socio-cultural beings; people.

3. SEMIOLOGY AND CULTURE

According to Danesi (2007) «human beings are interpreters of signs, and human history is essentially a testament to humanity's quest to understand the meaning of signs that characterize human life» and defined the study of this quest as semiotics (p. vii). Afterwards he added its ultimate goal and defined it as unravelling «the meanings that are built into all kinds of human products, from words, symbols, narratives, symphonies, paintings, and comic books to scientific theories and mathematical theorems» (Danesi, 2007:3). In other words, it can be defined as science of produced meanings. Through this it is possible to state that semiology and discourse are intertwined disciplines.

Societies as Sless (1986) also mentioned and the fabric of the universe itself are structured by a complex web of stand for relations. The semiotics, which is the study of signs and codes that involves the system of signs, deals with every single human product as signs and meanings that they stand for. Therefore 'societies' and thus 'cultures' can be accepted the primary source of the semiotic analysis. In order to understand what the semiotic really is it is important to clarify culture and communication as well as their interrelation. Sebeok (2001), underlined the interrelation between communication and semiotics by claiming

> *The subject matter of semiotics, it is often credited, is the exchange of any messages whatsoever-in a word, communication. To this must at once be added that semiotics is also focally concerned with the study of signification. Semiotics is therefore classifiable as that pivotal branch of an integrated science of communication to which its character as a methical inquiry into the nature an constitution of codes provides an indispensable counterpoint (pp 27-8).*

Leeds-Hurvitz (1993) in his book called *Semiotics and Communication: sign, codes, cultures* claimed that there are several ideas on communication such as involving the use of a specific type of signs, including the collection of symbols into codes, using symbols and codes as a way to socially structure reality and tolerating ordered human interaction. Beside this, Herzfeld and Melazzo (1988) clarified the interrelation between communication and semiotics by stating that semiotics occurred in the role of a kind of theory of culture, a theory which explains the essence and development of cultural phenomena.

Semiotics is the discipline of unscrambling meanings of the human products. These products involve cultural signs as well. Therefore reading cultural texts is the duty of semiotics. For the purpose of the study telling fortune by coffee grounds as a part of cultural structure will be examined through semiological analysis.

4. HISTORY OF COFFEE AND TELLING FORTUNE BY COFFEE GROUNDS

As it is known coffee remained largely confined to Ethiopia, where its native beans were first cultivated by Ethiopian highlanders. In addition to this as stated in The Columbia Encyclopaedia «Coffee was known in 15th-century Arabia; from there it spread to Egypt and Turkey, overcoming religious and political opposition to become popular among Arabs». Thus the coffee first discovered and used by Islamic world and then diffused to the other countries.

Coffee or that is to say Turkish coffee, which is the most known name of the type that will be explored, is cooked in tiny pots, which is called *cezve* (coffee pot). In order to prepare it, it is necessary to put a spoon of coffee for each measuring cup (scale is demitasse), and sugar as much as desired. Then need to be cooked till boiling. However the most known and significant peculiarity of Turkish Coffee is that grounds that left over and the shapes that they compose are interpreted through telling fortune. This became a part of Turkish culture.

These shapes that are composed by the coffee grounds are mostly interpreted by the one who called «fortune teller» but sometimes women as tea time in English culture try to tell each others fortune in order to waste their leisure time. Fortune telling by inspecting the grounds remaining in one's coffee cup as mentioned before is a characteristic of Turkish culture. However why and when do people need to know what's going to be or happen in the future should be examined.

Telling fortune by coffee grounds can be investigated under topic called Tasseography. It is accepted as a branch of foretelling that interprets patterns in tea leaves, coffee grounds, or even wine sediments. The importance of the omnipresent, cross cultural and historical generality of tea, coffee and sediment reading may be related to the primary human desire for understanding the self. Therefore human beings curiosity about the unknown or may be hopelessness, lead them to look for any other methods of answering questions. Telling fortune by interpreting patterns in tea leaves originated in China (Dunwich, G. 2002), interpreting wine sediments is discovered by an Ancient Greek and interpreting coffee grounds is part of the culture of Islamic world.

During the present study, interpreting symbols within the coffee grounds as a method of Tasseography is studied and naturalization of binary oppositions via the interpretations of the symbols is tried to be explored.

5. COFFEE GROUNDS, SIGNS AND MEANING

For the purpose of the study randomly selected 12 symbols/ signs, which may represent binary oppositions between East and West, or that is to say Christianity and Islamic World, are analysed through randomly selected 20 on-line coffee ground dictionary. While investigating them, signs categorized as the one which bears positive meaning and the one bear negative meaning.

The randomly selected and categorised symbols/ signs are; the cross-crescent, church-mosque, boy-girl, imam-the Father, boy-girl, pig-dog. These are all categorized into two groups as the West and the Rest or that is to say the East. Under the West, the cross, church, boy, the Father and pig is explored. On the other hand as the East, crescent, mosque, girl, imam and dog are examined. The reason of categorizing as such is the fact that the Father, church and the cross are the symbols of Christianity. In addition to this pig is forbidden by Islamic world while Christians eat it, boy bears positive meaning because of being male, masculine and symbolizing muscle while girl is opposite of it.

While exploring the possible interpretations of the signs that are listed, analysed according to randomly selected 20 on-line coffee ground dictionary. Within these 20 interpretations, 20 claimed that the Cross has negative meaning, while 20 out of 20 insist that crescent has positive meaning. 20 out of 20 resources stated that mosque has positive meaning while 12 of 20 claimed that the church signifies the negativity. Within 20 resources 14 insist that pig bears negative meaning but according to whole sources dog bears positive meaning. Finally according to all of the selected sources boy signifies «getting a good news» while girl signifies «the sadness of the enemy because of your success». Therefore if you will be happy because of sadness of your enemy it bears a positive meaning as well. However, at the end of the day it signifies sadness of someone as well.

Coffee grounds and telling fortune by coffee grounds, as mentioned before, is the part of the Eastern Culture. Therefore it is not so unusual to find out that the interpretations mostly are through giving positive meanings to the symbols which may refer to East. While interpreting in such a way they are only trying to decompress of the meanings which are given to them by the Western countries.

In addition to this, another interesting and important point is the method of telling fortune via coffee grounds. Coffee cup is divided into four parts with two imaginary lines. The first imaginary line divides cup as east and west. Eastern part of the cup (right side) which includes holder as well, symbolizes home and western part (left side) symbolizes outside of the home. Besides this, while interpreting signs on left side of the cup are classified as probable negative events that will be lived. On the other hand, the right side of the cup and signs on that part are interpreted as probable positive and good events that will be experienced.

Therefore, it is possible to say that because of being part of Eastern culture, discourses of telling fortune by coffee grounds are Eastern-centred. Via discourses, the meaning that are given to the East by the West are tried to be softened. However, while doing this the East gives negative meanings to the West to balance the meanings that they bear or mean for the West and Western countries.
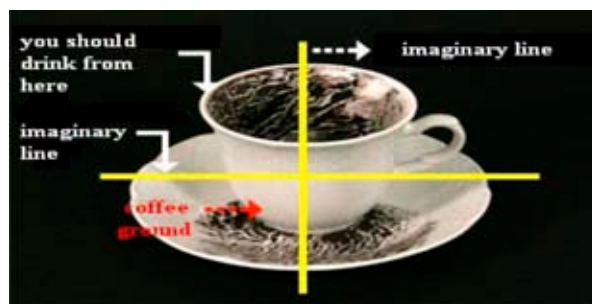
6. CONCLUSION

Culture, communication and semiology are intertwined fields. Culture can be defined as a whole of symbolic orders. As mentioned before semiology is accepted as a system of sign and codes which include the interpretations of the signs. These symbolic orders and signs with their codes are produced, interpreted and exchanged via communication.

Coffee grounds an telling fortune by coffee grounds which is accepted as the part of the Eastern culture especially Islamic world are investigated as a method of discourse. Via this method, Eastern cultures try to construct their own discourse and by interpretations of meanings, which signs bear within this symbolic order, the notion that they refer to according to the Western-centric system are tried to be exploded.

However, trying to construct such a system indirectly legitimated the discourses of meanings that given to the East by the West. By trying to explode the notion that given to them, they indirectly legitimated, naturalized and directly accepted the meanings that are given to them by Western cultures. Through this the last thing that is need to be said 'don't believe in fortunes but at the same time don't go without them'.

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