Under Question Cultural Boundaries: A Semiospheric Perspective based on Enabling Aspects of Mythical Characters

Emilia Nercissians
Department of Anthropology
Faculty of Social Science, University of Tehran
Tehran, Iran
enerciss@ut.ac.ir

Abstract— **Prior to the modern semiotics, the only discipline towards a systematic study of culture was Anthropology. Nowadays, cultural semiotics, as one of the sub-disciplines of semiotics tries to understand the culture and its related issues such as change, and tries to make it explicable by its methods such as participant observation as one of the common methods in ethnomethodology .Language as a social action carries series of codes. In the field study the author has directly observed the codes shared codes of the language between the sender and recipients in the interpretation process. The shared codes are integral parts of semiosphere. The value of these terms and their implication are emphasized in two rural areas called Shahkooh and Gharnabad as new contexts or scenes where the fusion of boundaries takes place. Of course, the words and concepts are not capable to function by themselves; each change is in need of an agent to put the concept of change in action. The agent or mythical figure of this change is a native son of the region who makes an interaction between the concepts of non-text, and text.**

Keywords— ***Code; cultural semiotics; semiosphere; sign process; text.***

I. INTRODUCTION

In Linguistic Anthropology, words are very important because they represent the world, and through this representation they construct the cultural affinities and of course cultural differentiations. Words as codes, when uttered in certain circumstances as a message, imply the first perception and point of view to the receivers. In this paper, the native trustworthy mythical hero enters into a semiosphere as a sender of the message,. This paper will show how an agent can bond the cultural boundaries or different semiospheres through the concrete act of speaking. By reviewing the concepts of semiotic signs such as semiosphere, cultural text, and culture with respect to their function in sign processes within sign systems, the paper will try to answer the following questions: (1) What determines the cultural boundaries?, (2) What relations do different cultures hold toward each other within the semiosphere?, and (3) How does cultural change originate?. The paper concludes by considering one of the rural development projects in Shahkooh and Gharnabad villages in Iran to show text and non-text in objective settings.

II. CONCEPTS OF SEMIOTIC SIGNS

A. Semiosphere

Semiosphere constitutes various identifiable boundaries. If one designates the totality of all sign systems in the world as the "semiosphere", one can say that cultural semiotics studies cultures as parts of the semiosphere. In this sense, cultural semiotics is the sub-discipline of semiotics which has culture as its subject of study. Semiosphere may be considered as a sort of communicative space; a space in which different cultural elements are capable of merging, fusing and sustaining. Lotman especially stresses that semiosphere is not just the sum total of the semiotic system, but also a necessary condition for any communication act to take place [1]. Each sphere in a semiospheric space is in constant dialogue with every other sphere in varying degrees. New information in the semiosphere can be produced only as a result of a dialogue between different codes, by which Lotman understands not simply as different human or artificial languages, but as different ways of organizing reality into coherent cognitive structures, or different ways of making reality conform to our understanding"[2]. Lotman was particularly concerned with how distinctive cultural sphere and the text that make them up are transformed in various modes of contextualization and in different historical epochs from the center of a cultural semiosphere to the periphery and vice versa. Mapping out this dynamic, Lotman bases his approach on the broad concept of text according to which every artifact with a function and a coded message can be regarded as text; he notes however that every culture selects from the set of these texts a small subset which is considered to be important by its members for their cultural identity [3], [4].

B. Text

In the second half of the 20th century the concept of text was used in the cultural semiotics [5]. For a long period of time, in philology, only visually receivable verbal signs or written form of signs, were accepted as " text". Later in 1950s all linear chains of verbal signs were regarded as "texts", which gave in auditory way receivable chains of verbal signs (speech) [6]. In the 1960s non-verbal signs such as

mathematical and logical formulas in the concept were accepted as "texts" as well.

Text in cultural semiotics means everything that belongs to a particular system of interpretation. Text is not an amorphous accumulation of signs, but it has its own inner connection, as well as connection to the situation. A text conveys a comprehensible message for its users and agents; the message is clearly perceived as being distinct from a "non-text" or"other text". A native can trace the concept of a "non-text" or '"other text" in her culture. It is taken for granted that, usually members of any culture think of themselves as insiders and the people of the other cultures as outsiders. On the inside, life is well ordered and comprehensible, whereas outside of it, it is chaotic and completely incomprehensible. In addition, at times the higher value placed in the inside borders ethnocentrism. Under these circumstances, "texts" as mentioned above, cannot exist outside the culture. Concept of culture may be understood differently. One may reduce the concept of culture simply to texts or symbols [7]. Each culture develops its own concept of text and often classifies the texts which are irrelevant to its identity as "non-texts". Levi-Strauss considers the relation among phenomena rather than the nature of the phenomena themselves and the systems into which these relations enter. He shows that for a variety of societies the systemic character of relations may exist between a basic unit such as opposition, correlations and possible combinations among them [8].*More commonly*, however, "non-texts" or "other texts" are excluded by the specific invisible force or mechanism of exclusion that exists in the mind and mentality of the community members or "mentifacts" (mental facts like artifacts). "Mentifacts" are the ideas and opinions just like certain cultural norms and values that are shared by community members. "Non-texts" or "other text", or even "deformed" text, may give a new floor for interpretation through a new mechanism. In the new circumstances, "deformed" text may generate a new text in inside the culture, existing earlier in the outside culture. The base of "mentifact" is a system of convention shared by members of a society.

C. Culture

Culture as a sign system exists in the mind of individuals. These individuals are collective sign users who are capable of using, receiving and reproducing texts. Codes by conveying message enable the sign users to solve certain problems. "Mentifacts", as results of mental culture, help a person enjoy the membership of different communities. If a society is defined as (a set of) sign users, culture as (a set of) texts, and amentality as (a set of) conventional codes, then these three domains are systematically related, since sign users are dependant on codes if they intend to understand texts. Text is a sign complex, and members of a community thus consider it valuable. Texts are defined as a reality for the members of the culture. These realities set the fixed standards for generations. Those valuable texts, over time, become incomprehensible for the members of a culture. The desire for existence creates room for series of changes and modifications. In order to legitimize these adjustments, myths about the creation of texts are employed. Cultural change has its specific mechanism in this respect.; It can be characterized as a shift in the boundaries between spheres. Displacement of the boundary between what is extra-text, non-text and what is regarded as counter-culture by the members of a society, is therefore worth being the subject of discussion.

III. INTERACTION BETWEEN TEXT AND NON-TEXT WITH THE PURPOSE OF PERSUATION

A. Justifying Necessity for Interaction Between Text and Non-Text

The industrial world is mostly considered 'the other' by the rural culture where agriculture is the main activity and the economy lies mostly in this primary sector.

Cultural readiness in coping with rapid change is of particular importance for rural developmental projects, such as tourism, which has gained much importance especially in natural and beautiful rural areas of Iran. Tradition, ethnic and cultural particularities, ceremonials, food, drinks, all things that are different and unique plus the behavior, habits, clothing, manners of the tourists present the boundaries between what is regarded as 'ours' and 'theirs' , 'culture' and 'counter culture'. In short, with the convergence of cultural and economic spheres, all material and spiritual elements are marketable commodities. Cultural interplay with its specific mechanism makes a shift in the boundaries of the two spheres. Let's look at another example of two other mentifacts, texts and semiospheres as assets in the developmental route of a region and culture. The internet may be considered as a space wherein different elements of culture are capable of fusing. This provides a base for a new dialogue and communication.

The Internet is the superhighway, through which the contemporary lifestyle with its own semiosphere comes to remote rural areas as non-text. Information and knowledge in the new sphere. It plays the most important role in mental as well as cultural and economic development in rural areas (non semiotic sphere). New technology due to its communicative feature increases the yield in agriculture and food security. There have been remarkable and rapid development in computing and communication technologies, which offer exciting possibilities for rural communities to move into the information age. Access to information as another sphere requires its own mechanism. It carries the promise of empowering the collective sign users or rural population, enhances the quality of their lives, increases their social participation and helps them share certain ideas and opinions that shape the mentifacts. Mentifacts, as a result of mental culture, functions just like certain cultural norms and values that are shared and valued by community members. On the negative side, this mechanism can deepen existing social stratification, and bring about new source and new modes of social exclusion in the internal level. An excellent example of successful rural development project in Iran is provided by Shahkooh and Gharnabad projects. Shahkooh is a village in the northeastern mountains of Tehran. This village which

lacks an elementary school, has only one central outhouse but has gone online.

B. Myth as Enabler

A native son is credited for promoting change during a visit in 1999. The first computers were bought by villagers themselves and set up in the mosque. A group of university students as volunteers taught the rural population. The goal was to teach computer skills to anyone interested among 6,000 residents, from chador clad girls working as farmers to the elderly. The majority of Shahkooh inhabitants reside in Gharnabad mostly during winter. Following the lead of Shahkooh, an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Service Center was established in Gharnabad through the efforts of the inhabitants. The rural community constructed a modern building with several halls, an amphitheater, and enough space and offices for further development. Electronic government was among the first projects. Facilities and offices were donated to the government to get the necessary activities and services including good communications. The first facilities in Gharnabad ICT Service Centre included communications, postal service, post bank, electronic shopping, insurance services provided via virtual office, coffee net, electronic government, electronic commerce through which villagers sell their products, online education and electronic books, and virtual offices leased to various organizations. A growth center is responsible for providing specialized services connected with information technology, and providing jobs through teleworking. The center is a nonprofit organization and provides for its expenses through its own earnings. It furnishes an opportunity not only for its founder, a professor in Iran University of Science and Technology, and his students, but also for other researchers and natives who have university education to conduct action research projects. They train the villagers who, upon graduation, themselves become employed in the center. Salaries are supplied by the center's own income. The center now has orders for industrial design and other prestigious jobs from Iranian industries, and is trying to attract international customers as well. The project has put the village on the map, and has attracted international attention. Plans to employ people from nearby villages are being drawn. The technological asset, the economic infrastructure, and the beauty of the neighboring rivers and forests are attracting many people and enterprises. Profit is also being made through capital appreciation and the incoming tourism. The government and some entrepreneurs have begun considering the repetition of this success story to use this experience as a pilot study and initiate similar development plans in other rural areas [9].

Figure1 shows the proposed model based on the relation between text and non-text on the realm of culture VS non-culture.
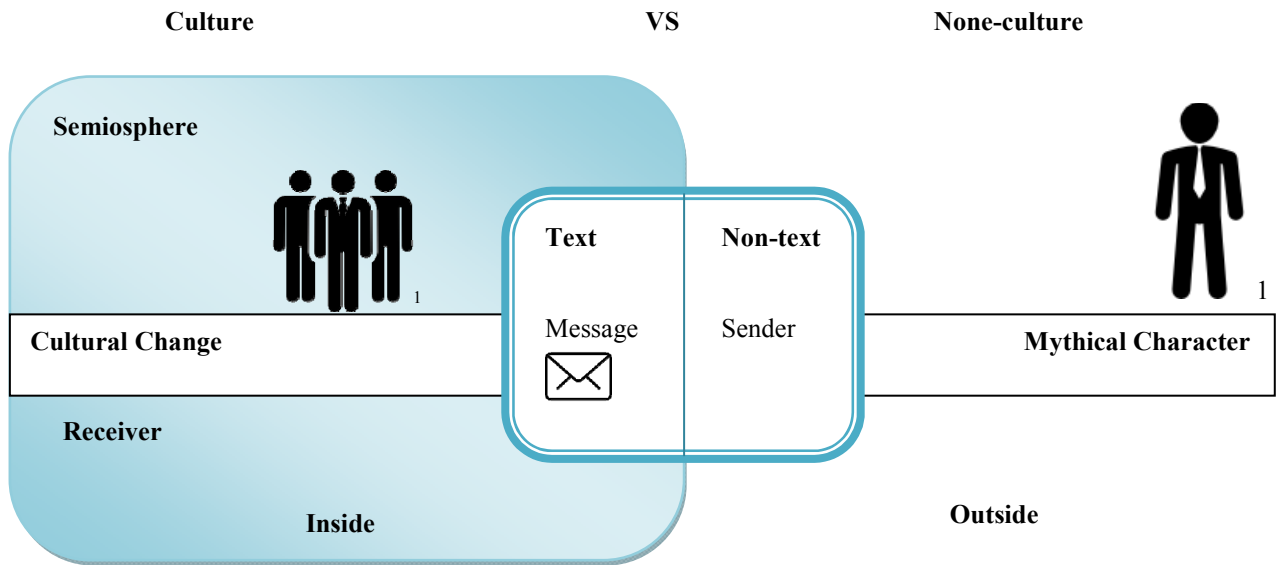

Fig. 1.   The proposed model based on text & non-text

C. Persuation of Inhabotants in Establishing a Genuine Center

Usually, population of any society, including the population of Shahkooh and Ghanabad, as the members of a specific culture, consider themselves as the true inhabitants and the guardians of the inside culture. To them, any person out of their area with his/her culture is considered an outsider. The inside is very precious to them; they feel calm and safe due to the ease, order and meaningfulness of the existing semiosphere. Their doors are not open to the non-text culture and its agents because the non-text brings in disorder and chaos [10]. However, reality forces them to modify their attitudes. The Shahkooh and Gharnabad inhabitants just like any other rural residents in Iran are faced with series of problems. Young people, despite their love and profound emotional ties to their village, prefer to migrate to the main cities specially Tehran. The reason for migration is the lack of facilities in rural areas and the desire for earning better livelihood. The non-text, in the case of our story the ICT, with its own specific technical features, has the potential of becoming a "text". The young people welcome this "non-text", especially when the person responsible for the *legitimization* and adjustment of this extra-text is none than the mythical son of the village Dr. Jalali who enjoys a great respect in the region. Now the mechanism of inclusion with positive mechanism of interpretation is starting to work with the efforts of Dr. Jalali and the existing socio-economic situation. Consequently, the parents are no longer worried about the migration of the young generation and the gradual evacuation of the village. Shahkooh and Gharnabad developmental projects fit well with the Lotman's notion of semiosphere as a condition for any communicative act [11]. The Internet provides a space for dialogue between the two different codes of ICT's dynamic non-text and the rural static text. The acceptance of non-text by text, after passing through the process of opposition, correlation and combination that Levi-Strauss has once mentioned for a variety of societies [7] or semiosphere, is also true for the above settings.

IV. CONCLUSION

We learned that semiosphere is a combination of different spheres. Each sphere has its own specific code. Constant dialogue within the spheres is the only way to introduce new ideas and notions. In this paper two villages in Iran were introduced as semiospheres with specific cultures. Edward B. Tylor considers culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society [11]. Culture as a sign system exists in the minds of individuals. These individuals are collective sign users. They are capable of using, receiving and reproducing texts. Codes by conveying message, enable the sign users to solve certain problems. "Mentifacts" as a result of mental culture, help a person enjoy the membership of different communities. If a society is definable as (a set of) sign users, culture as (a set of) texts, and amentality as (a set of) conventional codes, then these three domains are systematically related since sign users

depend on codes to understand texts. Text is a sign complex, and members of a community consider those texts valuable [11]. Definitely, the population of the two villages, Shahkooh and Gharnabad are not exceptions. Texts are defined as a reality for the members of a culture. Those realities set fixed standards that over time become incomprehensible for the members of the culture. The young generation migrates to the metropolis for reasons such as education and/or job hunting. Moreover, they are in touch with tourists who bring in their perspectives and world views. During a time span, a society may consider some segments of culture irrelevant for its identity and consider it as non-text. The desire for existence and continuity provides a base for series of changes and modifications. In order to legitimize those adjustments, myths about the creation of texts are employed. Dr. Jalali as a native educated son of the region, who is considered as a myth, sends a message of change to the inhabitants of the two villages. Cultural change has its specific mechanism; it can be characterized as a shift in the boundaries between spheres. Displacement of the boundary between what is extra-text and what is regarded as counter-culture is gradually accepted by the members of a society. New technologies, unlike older technologies, favor the urban condition. So they must be considered as non-text from the perspective of rural population. Howevert, we can see that the utilization of communication technologies and the electronic contents as a new culture, and culture due to its dynamism could accept this non-text as text that fits well in the two rural areas of Shahkooh and Gharnabad.

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