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On 'Portugueseness':
A Semiotic Approach

What is 'Portugueseness'? From a constructionist and semiotic perspective, in this paper I deal with this contested and fuzzy concept, which although many criticize as a fallacious attempt to describe a sort of reality that does not exist, is however a meaningful concept that many employ in order to guide social action. As I argue based on the work of Geertz and Eco, 'Portugueseness' needs to be conceived not referentially, but as a discursive entity that refers to a cultural unit that is distinct from other units that are meaningful when mapping the complex continuum of national identities. After discussing the concept from a theoretical perspective, I focus on three of its main dimensions: its meaning, its uses and its content.

1. Introduction

During the last decades, constructionist accounts have gained strong and wide acceptance within academic circles occupied with the study of identity (Wendt 1999; Berger & Luckmann 1966; Burke & Stets 2009). These approaches represent a scholarly attempt to overcome naïve and essentialist approaches to the subject. As a result of this shift, when using concepts that are supposed to refer to national cultures, characters or identities, like the one of 'Portugueseness'[1], the underlying theoretical assumption is that in using these concepts language is not being used referentially –that is, to *denote* something from the 'real' world, as there is nothing objective or material in the world that can be referred to with the concept of 'Portugueseness'–, but constructively. This means that language is a central piece in the creation and maintenance of social reality (Searle 1995), and it is in this line that concepts like the one that occupies us here gain relevance: they are employed in social discourse because they are meaningful, and they are *meaningful* because they are distinct from other similar categories, also meaningful, that help organize perception and cognition, specifically by referring to the continuum of national identities. In this sense, concepts like 'Portugueseness' have the same ontological status as unicorns or Santa Claus: although they cannot be found in the real, material world, they exist as meaningful categories and as such they shape the way in which individuals develop their subjectivities, enact their identities and guide their actions.

Does it make sense then to speak of 'Portugueseness'? This question is not new within the scholarly debate, especially taking into account that the concept has no empirically descriptive value –it does not *reflect* the idiosyncrasy of the Portuguese people, as originally believed–, but is a discursive construction instead, trampling the identity process of the Portuguese (de Sousa 2014, p. 353) as it might oversimplify a reality that is by nature complex and multiple. As it should be inferred from the previous paragraph, if one espouses a naïve and simplistic conception of language as the description of the facts of the world, then the answer is negative: given that 'Portugueseness' does not have a reference, therefore it is a void concept. However, as I will argue here, there is use in studying, discussing and putting in context 'Portuguenesess' as a discursive phenomenon. In this paper I will attempt to propose an argument to support this thesis based on a specific, semiotic-oriented approach to the study of culture: the one based on the pioneer works of Clifford Geertz (1973) and Umberto Eco (1976). By connecting the theoretical accounts of both authors, I will then try to argue how concepts like 'Portugueseness' should be conceptualized, together with an attempt to characterize what its meaning, use and content are.

2. A Theoretical Framework for the Study of 'Portugueseness'

The first step to take before attempting to found any systematic account in order to study 'Portugueseness' is to clearly declare which is the methodological approach that will be employed. In this regard, given that 'Portugueseness' is something that is related to the dimension of (national) culture, cultural semiotics seems an appropriate perspective from which to conduct the analysis.

When dealing with culture –in the sense of the word that is relevant for semiotics, the discipline interested in *meaning* and *meaning-making*–, the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) seems like an appropriate starting point. According to the author,

"Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning (p. 5)".

In his work, Geertz spouses a *semiotic* concept of culture, according to which "culture consists of socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people do [...] things as signal" (p. 14). These 'structures of meaning' constitute *systems*. In this sense, the principle of *coherence* gains a pivotal role as a category of analysis when dealing with how meaning circulates within the webs of significance that underlie the human experience. As Geertz argues, "cultural systems must have a minimal degree of coherence, else we would not call them systems" (p. 19).

Geertz believes that "the whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is [...] to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them" (p. 23). This idea of the existence of a 'conceptual world' that underpin human agency is key when dealing with concepts like 'Portugueseness', as I will argue later. In this scenario, cultural analysis is an *interpretative* activity, following the premise according to which "human behavior is seen as [...] symbolic action –action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies" (p. 11). The aim of cultural analysis is therefore "sorting out the structures of signification [...] and determining their social ground and import" (p. 10).

When dealing with concepts like 'Portugueseness' from a theoretical perspective, one is faced with words that express specific 'structures of meaning' that constitute a system and that have an impact on human perception and action. As an example, when an individual creates a post on social media showing his/her affiliation to a national group –e.g. a Portuguese youngster trying to perform his/her belonging to the cultural group of the Portuguese–, the idea of 'Portugueseness', even if there is nothing in the real, material world that can be referred to with this word, might be central, as it usually constitutes the toolbox from which our youngster will take resources in order to perform his/her identity as a member of the Portuguese community. This process will take place based on codes and conventions that are socially institutionalized in discourse and that are recognized by the youngster as part of his/her coherent system of signification. The same applies to public speeches delivered by authorities in order to foster the

national feeling among the population, like the ones that were frequent during the period of the Estado Novo (de Sousa & de Lemos Martins 2013, de Sousa 2017).

Actions like these (posts on social media, public speeches, etc.), when motivated by the idea of 'Portugueseness', bring the concept to life and strengthen it by producing more specific occurrences of it. When there is a concrete recognition by an individual of a specific way of belonging to the group of Portuguese –or, more generally, of 'being' Portuguese–, then when he/she acts guided by it the imaginary is reinforced and socially maintained as a meaningful category. This happens, for example, when reproducing Portuguese traditions, consuming traditional Portuguese music, or cooking meals that are regarded as typically Portuguese: these are ways of performing 'Portugueseness', that is, bringing this fuzzy imaginary to life.

These dynamics have been thoroughly examined by scholars engaged with social constructivism, the theoretical account that defends that a substantial portion of social life is constructed intersubjectively in discourse. Therefore, when dealing with 'Portugueseness' it should be clear that we are not dealing with anything that has a real existence outside discourse –there is nothing that defines something like an essence of what *is* Portuguese–, but narratives, social discourses, stories, cognitive frames and perceptions that might generate the impression of this essence being a fact but, in their quality of discursive entities, they actually give place to imaginaries and stories that somehow structure our perception of reality.

Semiotics of culture is the branch of Semiotics that studies "an heterogeneous set of forms and objects in which sociality is expressed and constructed" (Lorusso 2010, p. 3). In this sense, as Lorusso argues, semiotics of culture is a specific viewpoint rather than anything else, one that is characterized by its generality, formality and functionality (p. 5) and that should be in a position of "defining the logics of correlation that link texts and codes within a given system; the logic that makes a specific text compatible with a certain culture and, on the contrary, incompatible with other cultures" (p. 13). Let us now have a deeper look at the semiotic approach to culture and its conceptualization of meaning in order to better understand what 'Portugueseness' might be.

3. The Meaning of 'Portugueseness'

'Portugueseness' is a word that has a meaning and that as for this reason can be understood and used in the creation and interpretation of discourse by any competent member of the linguistic community. As opposed to words like, for example, the Russian *lubok*, Portuguese, Spanish, Brazilian and Angolan individuals, among other, *understand* the word and can grasp its meaning, even if they cannot explain with other words what it means. The relevant point here is that, although its specific meaning might not be clear –What does 'Portugueseness' actually refer to?–, it is a resource that can used to convey meaning and, as such, should be seen as a semiotic entity that consists of a dimension of the expression and one of the content.

In *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), Umberto Eco discusses the question of what the meaning of a term is (p. 67). In a theoretical effort to overcome naïve referential accounts of meaning, the author argues that "from a semiotic point of view [meaning] can only be a *cultural unit*" (p. 67), that is, a specific portion of the local encyclopedia that is shared and recognized by the competent users of the language. According to Eco, "a cultural unit can be defined semiotically as a semantic unit inserted into a system" (p. 67), an idea that brings us directly to the semiotic conception of culture proposed by Geertz: cultural systems have an internal structure based on the principle of coherence. In order to explain what he has in mind, Eco draws on Hjelmslev's well-known example:
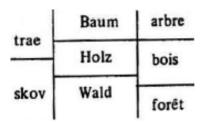

Figure 1 — Source: Eco (1976, p. 73)

In *Figure 1* it can be seen how different linguistic communities (Danish, German and French) establish distinctions between different words that have a referential function. The figure represents how the dimension of the content is culturally segmented in distinct units by these three groups. As it can be seen, what in French is referred to as 'arbre' is equivalent to what Germans call 'Baum', but the Danish word 'trae', a synonym of 'arbre' and 'Baum' when we think of a tree, even if it refers to this portion of reality (the concept of a tree), it also covers a bit more, as it also refers to what Germans call "Holz" and French "bois" (wood). In Danish, the semantic field of 'trae' is broader than those of 'arbre' and 'Baum'. Where the 'line' that separates a concept from another is set by a linguistic community plays, hence, a key role in the establishment of meaning. According to Eco, "a cultural unit is defined inasmuch as it is placed in a system of other cultural units which are opposed to it and circumscribe it" (p. 73). A concept is therefore meaningful if it allows the establishment of a distinction with other concepts that are relevant within the cultural system of a group. Consequently, meaning should be conceived as "the positional value of the sign" (p. 73), and "a cultural unit 'exists' and is recognized insofar as there exists another one which is opposed to it" (p. 73). Eco's conclusion is that "it is the relationship between the various terms of a system of cultural units which substracts from each one of the terms what is conveyed by the others" (p. 73).

From this specific perspective on how meaning –and culture– works, concepts like 'Portugueseness' are of upmost relevance, even if they are not referential, as they express distinctions that for a given culture are relevant. It could be stated that concepts like this have a *cognitive value*: they serve as frameworks for the segmentation of perception and social classifications, especially when dealing with the attribution of meaning to social identity (Burke & Stets 2009). In this sense, for people who identify themselves as 'Portuguese' –because they were born either in Portugal or from Portuguese parents, or any other reason–, establishing a difference with other similar concepts like 'Spanishness' –linked to a neighboring country– and 'Brazilianness' –linked to a country that shares the language and a history– might be a mode of achieving some kind of knowledge about the social world, a world that, as we

know, requires identifications with groups in order to define an individual's identity (Gómez García 2012, Hofstede et al. 2010).

The contrast of 'Portugueseness' with other cultural units was the tactic employed, for example, by Joana Miranda (2006) in her research on Portuguese national identity: the author used the distinct categories of 'Americanness', 'Spanishness' and 'Cape Verdeanness' in order to contrast them with the 'Portugueseness' (p. 51), as these are meaningful categories to the individuals that participated in her fieldwork. Even though it is methodologically questionable that there might actually be something objective like an American, a Spanish or a Cape Verdean 'way of being', it makes sense to conceive these three tags as imaginaries that have an impact and incidence on discursive self-perceptions. It is precisely there where the value of such concepts lies, and why they should concern anyone dealing with cultural structures and dynamics from a scholarly perspective: by analyzing them we can, as Geertz (1973) argues, gain access to the conceptual world in which individuals live.

'Portugueseness' is hence to be understood as a cultural unit, a position within a coherent system of meaning that is somehow linked to Portugal –the country–, its history and its people, and that is distinct from other cultural units that are linked to other countries, their histories and their people.

Nevertheless, even though it is arguable that there are any objective and/or factual traits that constitute and define a specific Portuguese 'way of being', 'Portugueseness' as an imaginary has a *material* basis, as every imaginary does: Portugal, the country –or more precisely, the nation-state. Every nation-state is constituted discursively around a shared history and memory, two key components of national identity. As José Manuel Sobral (2012) argues, "national identities are formed historically, in time" (p. 84), a dynamic that is supported by a set of past events that are kept alive as shared and common in cultural memory (Assmann 1999). Historically, sharing a common past and having a common remembrance gives place to the emergence of the perception and feeling of being part of a distinct (national) community, which today matches a nation-state (at least in the case of the Portuguese). These factual, objective and material events (past events, the existence of a state with boundaries and autonomy, etc.) are the material basis that works as the starting point of the imaginary. When speaking of 'Portugueseness' we are not speaking about the country or its people; nevertheless, these are the material facts that fuel the fire of the imaginary in terms not of a country, but of a distinct category of meaning that orders social discourse.

In this sense, from a constructionist perspective Portugal is not only a country, that is, a political-administrative entity, but also a sort of 'imagined place', which is represented by means of the employment of discourse not only in advertisements (touristic, for example), but also in travel guides, press articles and other forms of enunciation. In this regard, when discussing the phenomenon of stylization from a sociolinguistic perspective, Coupland (2007) argues that, instead of conceiving places in objective and physical terms, "an alternative approach is to conceive of place as a culturally defined category, and indeed as a social meaning" (p. 121), a statement that clearly reflects Eco's conception of meaning as a distinct cultural unit.

Therefore, places should be considered from a "subjectivist and social constructionist conception" (p. 122), what would imply that discursively, when speaking of Portugal, the reference is not always the geopolitical entity, but also an imaginary cultural unit of meaning that is conceived as carrying some specific traits, as we will see later. This constructionist conception of place explains how "a sense of local belonging can therefore transcend physical distance" (p. 122), like for example in the case of second or even third generation migrants that feel a belonging to a place that they might not even actually know (by direct experience), but that they know indirectly (by the mediation of stories that they receive from their families and communities).

4. The Functions of 'Portugueseness' in Discourse

Although it might not be clear which contents actually constitute the concept of Portuguenesess, history has proven that it can be a powerful category in order to organize social reality, as it happened during the time of the Estado Novo, which usually recurred to the idea of an authentic Portuguese national character and identity as a way of constructing precisely that national character. In this sense, we can see clearly how concepts like 'Portugueseness' work as meaningful categories that help individuals place themselves within the more general network of meaning that is the national identity, a category of self-identification that, as every cultural aspect, implies a cutting of the continuum of the content as it is conceived by that culture.

Nationality –the feeling of belonging to a nation– is one of the key features to define personal identity by means of membership to specific groups, both real and imagined. Hofstede et al. (2010) write that:

"If you could make three statements about yourself, what would you say? Would you mention individual characteristics such as the color of your eyes, your favorite sports or food, or the like? More likely, you would mention group membership attributes such as gender, profession, nationality, religion, which sports team you favor, and which role you fulfill in society. [...] Much of people's social activity is spent explicitly maintaining symbolic group ties".

In an overwhelmingly complex reality, individuals need simplifications in order to guide their actions. In this picture, basic and general categories like nationality, gender, and sports team one favors facilitate the process. Nevertheless, these are imagined communities, given that, as Anderson (1983) argues for the case of nations, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 6). Taking as a fact that the world is organized based on nation-states, belonging to one of those distinct categories of meaning is a central component of personal identification. As Cunha (2006) writes, the concept of 'Portugueseness' postulates "a specificity that makes us [the Portuguese] unmistakable in the context of nations" (p. 105). This might explain why concepts like 'Portugueseness' emerge and prosper: they are means that fulfill a cognitive social function linked with identity for individuals.

As Cunha (2006) points out, imaginaries like these are usually subject of mythification in time, a dynamic that can be seen in the work of Portuguese intellectual elites attempt-

ing to come up with inventories of traits that, according to them, constitute 'Portugueseness', such as Sebastianism, the *saudade* and the sea, among other (p. 56). In this sense, Jorge Dias, in a well-known article from 1950 on the fundamental elements of Portuguese culture, when dealing with Portuguese national character argued that among the Portuguese there are three different 'mental types': (1) the dreamer (*sonhador*), closer in spirit to the Celtic temperament; the faustic (*faustico*), closer to a Germanic type; and the fatalistic (*fatalistico*), closer to Orient (quoted by Cunha 2006, p. 56). This identification of the 'mental types' with these three romanticized categories contributes to the process of mythification, consisting of *unconscious symbolization* (Eco 1964). As a result, simple and easily understandable narratives are established, which later can be used by individuals to fulfill the above mentioned function of national identification.

Among the consequences of the process of unconscious symbolization, we can mention the emergence of a specific iconic dimension of 'Portugueseness', which as de Sousa (2014) writes, is constituted by icons like Zé Povinho, Saint Anthony, the *bacalhau*, the rooster of Barcelos and D. Sebastião, among other (p. 361). These components become visual symbols of 'Portugueseness' and are therefore used to reproduce the imaginary. In this process, a shared local encyclopedia (Eco 1976) is established.

Even if not objective, imaginaries like 'Portugueseness' play a key cognitive function for individuals. As Jerome Bruner (1991) argues, "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative-stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (p. 4). Imaginaries like these help individuals organize their experience of the world and, as the simplifications that they are, they facilitate this task.

5. The Content of 'Portugueseness'

The key question when dealing with a concept like 'Portugueseness' is to understand by means of which contents this imaginary is constituted and sustained. Each narrative is a complex articulation of meaning that is composed by diverse sub-units that, together, constitute a distinct unit of meaning. Which are the main elements that compose that specific discourse that is called 'Portugueseness'?

In the first place, there is a core set of factors to be analyzed that refer to what Miranda (2006) calls 'endogenous identity'. In her study on national identity, the author identified six categories of national differentiation that are meaningful to the participants, three of which are exclusive of each country, and three that are shared traits. The first group consists of (1) history, (2) climate and (3) culture, which are "theoretically incomparable, as they mark the specificity of the countries" (p. 53). These markers refer to an *endogenous* identity, in opposition to other factors like (4) economic power, (5) technological power and (6) international prestige, which constitute the 'exogenous identity' as these dimensions are common to other national groups. Regarding history, the past is a strong component of every distinct cultural unit of meaning attached to a nation-state. In this sense, there is one key feature of it that is a central piece of 'Portugueseness': the maritime discoveries. According to de Sousa (2014), these constitute an "idea that is always present to illustrate the potential of the country"

(p. 354), what might explain why *Os Lusíadas* by Luís de Camões and *Mensagem* by Fernando Pessoa, two literary works that deal with the exploration of the seas carried out by the Portuguese, are usually regarded as representative examples of 'Portugueseness'. In this sense, not surprisingly the Estado Novo made a vast use of this issue in an attempt to mythify it as one of the core features of 'Portugueseness' (de Sousa 2014). As the Italian novelist Antonio Tabucchi writes in *Sostiene Pereira*, a novel that develops during this period,

"I feel I must tell you that originally, we were Lusitanians, and then came the Romans and the Celts, and then came the Arabs, so what sort of race are we Portuguese in a position to celebrate? The Portuguese Race, replied the editor-in-chief, and I am sorry to say Pereira, that I don't like the tone of your objection, we are Portuguese, we discovered the world, we achieved the greatest feats of navigation the world over, and when we did this, in the 16th century, we were already Portuguese, that is what we are and that is what you are to celebrate, Pereira."

The sea as an imagined entity gains relevance within 'Portugueseness' also beyond the discoveries. Portugal lies on the Atlantic, and as a result the relationship of the Ocean with the idea of something specific of Portugal is strong. This is potentiated when taking into account the extensive presence of the seafood component in Portuguese national kitchen (sardines, codfish, cuttlefish, octopus, squid, clams, prawns, etc.), together with the usual sunny weather that allows many Portuguese to develop an imaginary relationship with the beach as one of the most prominent landscapes of their national identity. Again, mythification can be seen in action.

Another aspect that is constitutive of the imaginary that we call 'Portugueseness' has to do, as it usually happens with other imaginaries based on other nation-states, with an idealization of character. In this regard, one of the key concepts is the one of saudade, which can be regarded as the idiosyncratic feature of Portuguese sensibility (de Sousa 2014, p. 353). This 'longing for the past' is conceived as being based on a specific conception about life: fatalism, an idea that was already presented by Jorge Dias in his 1950 conference (de Sousa 2014, p. 354) and that might explain why *fado* is its flagship music (de Sousa 2014, p. 354). The 'depressive feelings' (de Sousa 2014, p. 353) are imagined as constitutive of 'Portugueseness', as opposed to the more positive feelings that are usually attributed to other group-imaginaries that are familiar to the Portuguese, like 'Spanishness' and 'Brazilianness'. Actually, in the narratives used to express the difference between the Portuguese and the Brazilian, this is a very frequent trait that is mentioned, as it gives place to a simple dichotomy (happy/depressive) that can be easily grasped in discourse. More traits could be individualized and discussed, but this is the point where Semiotics, as a discipline oriented towards the explanation on how meaning is possible, needs to stop its work and empirical methodology needs to be developed, for example by conducting surveys and interviews among people who identify themselves as directly linked to 'Portugueseness' and among those who do not, but that nevertheless can recognize it as a distinct category of meaning –like the Spanish or the Brazilian. In this regard, a list or catalogue of traits that are regarded by ordinary people as constitutive of 'Portugueseness' can be a valuable starting point to dig deeper and understand how

and why these became part of the narrative/imaginary. These can go from material aspects, like commodities, dishes, historical figures, etc., to more abstract ones, like ideals, values and stories.

6. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this article was to show why there is use in studying, discussing and putting in context the concept of 'Portuguenesess', even if it can lead to essentialist confusions. As a discursive phenomenon that has an impact on how people conceive social reality and act in it, its dynamics and structure –its core elements, its boundaries– should be discussed, but always keeping in mind that we are dealing with a *discursive* phenomenon –a narrative, an imaginary– and not something that has an empirical correlation. As Alexander Wendt (1999) writes, the two core tenets of constructivist theory are: (1) the belief that "the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces", and (2) that "the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature" (p. 1). Within this theoretical paradigm, it should be clear why concepts like 'Portugueseness' are central when trying to understand how meaning emerges, circulates and is consumed in the socio-cultural dimension: even if their meaning and content are not clear, they fulfill a cognitive function.

From a theoretical perspective the concept of 'Portugueseness' needs to be handled with care. As Cunha (2006) argues, concepts like this usually are presented as analytical categories that are plain, uniform and one-dimensional (p. 100), leaving aside fundamental fractures –ethnical, regional, class-related– that also constitute 'Portugueseness'. As José Manuel Sobral (2012) argues, class, gender, religion, generational values, political cleavages, even regional differences, are to be taken into account in order to fully understand that 'Portugueseness' cannot be conceived as a homogeneous concept. In this sense, there is the threatening danger (always present) of reification of national identity, that is, to assume that there is something factual and/or objective that constitutes the essence of a group.

My attempt in these pages was to shed some like on the blurry concept of 'Portugueseness'. As Villaverde Cabral (2003) argues, concepts like this demonstrate "how something with a content after all so imaginary and poor can, in fact, produce effects of such realness and relevance for a community" (p. 529). It is in this sense that a semiotic clarification of what 'Portugueseness' is, as a concept that has a meaning, that is imagined as having a specific content, and that is used somehow in discourse might be relevant. That was my purpose in dealing with 'Portugueseness': "a Portugueseness of which many speak, but that it is not quite clear what it means" (de Sousa 2014, p. 355).

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