

Another supposedly mutually exclusive opposition, and one that has received great attention, is that of "right-handedness" and "left-handedness" (or, for short, right and left). Although Robert Hertz was the first, in 1909 (see Needham 1973), to recognize the essential polarity and asymmetry between these two choices, many investigators since then have treated them as two mutually exclusive choices (with ambidextrous behavior being as it were 'doubly marked'), evaluated as "good" versus "bad" or on some other qualitative dimension (see some of the articles in Needham 1973). Of course, on a certain interpretation of "good" and "bad", right-handedness in being "good" is also unmarked (minus-interpretation), while left-handedness in being "bad" is also marked. And of course, in some cultures, left-handedness is actively suppressed.¹¹

In order to assess the relation between these two for our culture, we must have recourse to the concept of "handedness" in general. Seen from this more general perspective, it is clear that the concept of "handedness" covers not only the generalization (zero-interpretation) that human beings are asymmetrical, but also the specific case (minus-interpretation) of right-handedness: right-handedness in a person is not 'remarked' upon (zero-interpretation), while left-handedness is 'remarked' upon (pardon the pun). It is interesting in this connection that some investigators tend to use the term *right-handedness* and *handedness* interchangeably, and that studies of the relation between handedness and the asymmetry of the brain generally deal with right-handers and treat left-handers as a special (marked) case. Anyone who is friends with a "lefty" (note that we don't even think about people as being "righties" except in very special circumstances — e.g., baseball pitchers), has heard the common complaint¹² that scissors, tools of various sorts, fountain pens, knives, potato peelers, molded pot handles, pitchers with one lip, playing cards, classroom desks, drinking fountains, corkscrews, bottle tops, doors in general, gear-shifts on cars, can openers, etc. all assume a right-handed person — the right-handed person is in fact the overall norm (zero-interpretation) for our culture. Ours is then a right-handed culture where most things are made for right-handers: there are catalogues especially for left-handed items, whereas catalogues of right-handed items are simply catalogues. This difference is reflected linguistically as well: right-handed scissors are of course called *scissors*, whereas left-handed scissors are called *left-handed scissors*.

Now, this semiotic asymmetry is based on a physical asymmetry that itself is tied to another asymmetry, namely the functional polarity of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. What is of interest here, of course, is not what these asymmetries are 'in reality', but rather the semiotic conceptualization of and, even more, creation of 'reality'. In addition, it

may be asked what the association is — phylogenetically and ontogenetically — between the asymmetry of the brain on the one hand and the asymmetry of human conceptualization on the other (cf. Hertz [1909] 1973 and Ivanov 1972).

It remains to be seen also whether those other attributes generally listed along with left ~ right (e.g., south ~ north, black clans ~ white clans, co-wife ~ first wife, junior ~ senior, woman ~ man, inferior ~ superior, predecessors ~ successors, honey-collecting ~ cultivation, etc. — Needham 1973: 116) all have the same markedness relation as left ~ right does. That is certainly the assumption of the investigators in Needham 1973 — in fact not only has the assumption been that the markedness relation is the same but also that the mark itself is the same.

But this brings up an important point — if we do an analysis of a culture over time or especially if we do cross-cultural analysis, it should not be assumed a priori that a given opposition, for example, left-handedness ~ right-handedness, death ~ life, or barrenness ~ fertility, has the same mark in all cases. It may be that at a given time or in given cultures, the mark associated with left-handedness is different: if so, we are not dealing with the same opposition, because the mark is only defined by the opposition itself. To use the same terms ("fertility", "barrenness", "death", "life", "left", "right") in widely different cultural contexts is to obscure sometimes the very different symbolic notions that are associated with those terms and in the long run define the terms. This is akin to the process in linguistics of confusing meaning and reference: we are interested here, not in the reference ("left-handedness") *per se*, but rather in the semiotic import that left-handedness carries when opposed to right-handedness. If the semiotic import is different in different cultures, then in effect the opposition left-handedness ~ right-handedness is different, and should not be viewed as 'the same thing'.

Conclusion

It is clear, then, that a better understanding of various correlated oppositional pairs in culture, in literary usage, in language, etc. is crucially based on the evaluation of the hierarchic relationship such pairs evidence and on the dynamic dialectic the markedness relations create. Any investigation of any semiotic system must take this dialectic into account if it is to correctly characterize one of the ways in which human beings create symbolic and conceptual frameworks.

In fact, it should be remembered that any opposition is an opposition of