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How to Analyze Authority and Power in Interaction?
"Under whose authority?"
Kim Davis denies marriage licenses to LGBT couples

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Conflicts, Dialectics, and Semiotic Transformation of Authority and Power through Critical Discourse Analysis

In a sociological sense, one cannot directly equate power as authority. Max Weber (Aron 1989; Gerth & Mills 1970) had explained why. While power always exerts to dominate, only legitimate domination is authorized power. Authority therefore contains a strong political essence of legitimacy which, based on Weber's categorization, descends "three ideal types of domination": charismatic domination that derives its authority based on personal qualities, traditional domination based its authority on customs or belief systems, and rational (-legal) domination with its authority based on statutory law (e.g. Aron, 1989: 84). Dahrendorf (1959) would later further Weber's notion of rationalization in modernity, and pointed out that many conflicts in modern societies were caused by the conflicts between authority-haves and -have-nots defined by institutions.

While authority is very social structural based and positioned, power can be more fluid and situational when we look into people's interactions. Within a conversation, small victories can be won through seizing opportunities in turn-taking or intelligent rhetoric maneuvers. Questioning is found as a way of exercising power to disturb the balance of turn-taking, and therefore, to upset the conversational equality between interlocutors, to dominate the topics, and to redistribute rights and obligations (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Wang, 2006).

However, an analysis of the news excerpt would overthrow both the previous assumptions that 1) (political) conflicts between social groups are due to the dichotomous ownership (haves vs. have-nots) of institutional authorities proposed by conflict theory, and 2) that an analysis within the discursive structure of conversation between interlocutors without taking their social positions and

identities into account is suffice to understand power and authority. In the second part of this abstract I will give a short analyse to demonstrate the short-comings of both the structural-fixed conceptualization of authority and power, and the enclosed interactions within the text. I will then propose a CDA approach to look at how subjects, actions, and texts interact with each other within a specific time and space and how these interactions will give semiotic transformation of power and authority.

Episode 1: The Conflicts of Two Authorities

1. Clerk: I just want you to know that we are not issuing marriage licenses today.
2. Citizen1: Why?
3. Clerk: depending.....
4. Citizen1: what the appeal is that?
5. Clerk: depending the appeal of 6th circus
6. Citizen1 : it's been denied. The appeal has been
7. denied
8. Clerk: And the question is.....
9. Citizen1: Right, that you're supposed to issue the marriage license.
10. Clerk: And we're not issuing the marriage license.
11. Citizen1: The Supreme Court denied your saying.
12. Clerk: We are not issuing marriage licenses today.
13. Citizen1: Based on what?
14. Clerk: So I would ask you to go ahead and.....
15. Citizen1: Why are you not issuing marriage license
16. Today?
17. Clerk: Because.....I'm not.
18. Citizen2: Under whose authority are you not issuing a license?
19. Clerk: Under God's authority
20. Voice at the back: Did the Lord tell you?
21. Citizen1: Did God tell you to do this? Did God to treat us like this?
22. Citizen2: I don't believe this.
23. Clerk: I bed you all to leave. You are interrupting my business.
24. Citizen1: You can all the
25. police if you want us to leave.

From line 3 to line line 11, we can see citizen 1 is questioning the clerk's rational-legal authority. And to his understanding, the clerk is supposed to issue them their marriage license if based on the Supreme Court's decision, that her authority has a limit based on her position within the legal institution. Until she answered: "Under

God's authority," in which she shift her track of legitimacy from domination from rational-legal authority to traditional authority based on her religious/custom belief. In her value system, it seems that traditional authority holds a higher status than rational-legal authority. However, we can see during this argument, her shift of legitimacy was not exactly denied because what the other voices asked her is to "validate" whether she really get the legitimacy from traditional authority, so they asked her: "did the lord tell you?" Then she suddenly shifted back to her rational-legal authority and asked people to leave because they are interrupting "her business." Citizen1 then complied with her logic to shift back to the same authority and mentioned "police."

From this analysis of the conversation text, we know that the conflict happened not because the haves vs. have-nots of authority, but the clashes between two different authorities (traditional vs. rational-legal). And we can see that those LGBT couples demanding for marriage licenses did not adhere their dialogical track with the clerk on one authority only. They are able to shift with her change and keep questioning. The conflicts of authorities are not between two different social groups, but more within one social group which is personified by Kim Davis, the county clerk.

If using CDA, this method will highlight for us more about not only the participants' power maneuverings and legitimization within the dialogue as a closed text, but to also to reflect a context of American historical stage right now when the conflicting state between different authorities and that of the social groups involved.

The CDA outline of analysis will follow Fairclough's (2002) three stages of analysis to see: 1) how the conflicts between authorities and their power maneuvering are mobilized through language within his dialogue as a text; 2) analysis of the practice of this political discourse as a news report; and 3) how this discursive event is exercise as a social/cultural practice by different media content. The third stage will reorganize the original text of the excerpt as an object within the cultural practice, to see the possible semiotic transformation of both the authority and power represented within this interaction as the continuity of communication.

References

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