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## SECRET LANGUAGE IN THE TURKISH FOLKTALE\*

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Among the many mistaken ideas about oral narrative are the notions that folktales are always short, that their structure is always linear and simple, and that their characters always communicate in lucid and straightforward language. This paper will present evidence that belies the last of these notions and shows that at times communication in folktales can be obscure and confusing because it is relayed in a secret or coded medium. Such verbal obscurity is not, of course, limited to Turkish oral narrative, and an effort will be made to suggest its far wider distribution, but the bases for this study are the first 1.000 tales translated into English from the extensive holdings of the Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative.<sup>1</sup> As will be seen, the loss of perspicuity that develops in the tales selected derives from three different modes of expression: (1) sign and gesture,<sup>2</sup> (2) symbolic language, and (3) dialogue in cryptic metaphor.

The plot patterns for the first of these modes (Sign and Gesture) are identified in the Aarne-Thompson Type Index<sup>3</sup> as No. 924--Discussion by Sign Language and No. 924-A--Sign Language Misunderstood. The equivalent of these in the Eberhard-Boratav Type Index<sup>4</sup> is No. 312--Die Zeichensprache. Sometimes these types stand alone as entire tales, as they do in the second example below, "Wisdom Comes from Intellect, Not Age." At other times they appear within a tale only as a motif--see "The Wise Old Weaver" below--while the overall structure of the tale conforms to a different (and more comprehensive) type. The motif here is listed in the **Motif Index of Folk Literature**<sup>5</sup> as Motif J 1804--Conversation By Sign Language Mutually Misunderstood.

In folktales sign language is not used as a mere *jeu d'esprit*, for its message is seldom a matter to be taken lightly. Usually it is employed to resolve international crises fraught with overtones of war. The emissary of a foreign power appears at the Turkish court and threatens an invasion unless the padişah can provide correct an-

\* Bildiri sahibi Kongreye katılamamıştır. Kongre öncesi gönderdiği bildiri metnidir.

1 This is a collection of folktales at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. Tales there are available for use in Turkish on magnetic tape and in English in typescript volumes. Henceforth in this paper the Archive will be referred to simply as ATON.

2 For introductory comments on the use of sign language in Middle Eastern and Central Asian literature and folklore, see N.M. Penzer, Ed. **The Ocean of Story** (Delhi, 1968), I, 80-82 and VI, 248-250.

3 Aarne, Antti, and Stith Thompson. **The Types of the Folktale**. Helsinki, 1973.

4 Eberhard, Wolfram, and Pertev Naili Boratav. **Typen Türkischer Volkamärchen**. Wiesbaden, 1953.

5 Thompson, Stith. **Motif Index of Folk Literature**, 6 vols. Bloomington, 1955-1957.

swers to a series of riddles and seemingly unanswerable questions. The ultimate threat is delivered in sign language which the padişah cannot understand and thus cannot respond to. The tale titled "The Wise Old Weaver"<sup>6</sup> furnishes a good example of this scenario. (For the purpose of brevity here, I have compressed slightly the following excerpt from that tale.)

A stranger came to the palace of the padişah, drew a circle on the pavement of the courtyard, and then sat in the middle of that circle. This man disregarded all questions asked of him, and no one was able to find out who he was or what it was that he wanted. He just sat in the middle of the circle and kept quiet. Many people tried to make the stranger talk, but they all failed. Upon this, the padişah asked one of his attendants to bring the wise old weaver to him.

The weaver was brought from his home, and the padişah informed him of the arrival of the stranger and of this stranger's unaccountable behavior. The weaver thereupon went to his chicken coop, caught a cock, and put it under his arm. He also picked up two walnuts and put them in his pocket. Then he went to the courtyard of the palace, where the stranger was still sitting. By this time the padişah had had his throne moved to the courtyard so that he could watch the way in which the weaver dealt with the stranger.

When the weaver arrived, he took a stick and drew a circle inside the circle that had been drawn by the stranger, and then he sat in that inner circle. Everyone watched in wonder at what the weaver was doing. When the stranger at that point took a handful of millet from his pocket and scattered it on the ground, the weaver let loose the cock which he had hidden beneath his gown, and the cock at once began to eat the millet. When the stranger saw this, he said, "But there will be blood shed!" Thereupon the weaver took from his pocket the two walnuts and threw them upon the ground. Seeing this, the stranger shouldered his bag and left. The weaver then put the walnuts back in his pocket, placed the cock beneath his arm again, and returned home.

The padişah, like everyone else, was greatly surprised and puzzled by the things that he had just observed. He could not understand how the two men had communicated with each other, and so he had the weaver recalled to the palace. When the old man arrived, the padişah asked him to explain all that had happened.

"Your Majesty, that stranger was an infidel Muscovite.

By drawing a circle and sitting in the center of it, he meant that the world was his. But then I drew a smaller circle within his and sat in it, by which I indicated that we were also a nation and had the right to occupy part of that world. When he scattered millet on the ground, he meant that he

had a great many soldiers. I freed the cock which then ate the millet, meaning that we had troops that would get rid of his. When he said, 'But there will be blood shed!' I threw down the two walnuts to show that I would bet my testicles on the outcome."

In "Wisdom Comes from Intellect, Not Age,"<sup>7</sup> a vizier questions the padişah's claim to being the world's supremely wise man. Angered by the vizier, the ruler gives him forty days in which to find a wiser person, with death as the punishment for failure. In his frantic search to find such a person, the vizier discovers an extremely shrewd youth, identified only as the Son of Ahmet, whom he takes to the palace. After the padişah and the Son of Ahmet exchange signs and gestures, the latter is acknowledged to be the wiser and is rewarded by the ruler. Later the padişah explains to the relieved but bewildered vizier the meaning of his silent conversation with the precocious boy.

"As soon as the two of you entered this room, I filled a bucket with water and placed it in the center of the room. By doing this I was telling him, 'My wisdom is as broad as the sea.' The boy responded by placing a large knife across the bucket, meaning, 'But I am the bridge that can cross that water.' By Allah, I was surprised by this statement! I then began stroking my white beard, meaning, 'Beware not to offend me, for I am old, wise, and powerful!' But he then placed his hands on his head to say, 'Wisdom does not come from age but from brains.'"<sup>8</sup>

Symbolic language does not require any of the action or drama present in sign and gesture. Instead, it imparts its message by means of analogies and associations suggested by particular physical objects; sometimes the meaning is dependent on the arrangement or juxtaposition of such objects or the context in which they appear. Although our primary sources here are oral narratives, it should be noted that such symbolic discourse is not entirely the product of folk imagination but rather a social phenomenon derived also from Turkish real life. It was at one time sufficiently common to call itself to the attention of European visitors. Among such observant visitors was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife of the British ambassador to the Ottoman court in the early eighteenth century. Writing to an English friend in 1718, she discussed this Turkish custom and described a wordless Turkish love letter comprised of a number of objects including "... a pearl, various flowers, spices and fruits, and a golden thread."<sup>9</sup>

7 ATON No. 739; Aarne-Thompson Type 274; Eberhard-Boratav Type 312.

8 Similar use of sign language appears several times in the *Arabian Nights*. See, for example, the story of "Aziz and Azizah" in Edward Lane's edition of *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment* (London, 1841), I, 535-569. Other Turkish specimens can be found in the fifteenth-century collection of tales titled *The History of the Forty Vizirs*. In E. J. W. Gibb's edition of that work (London, 1886) see "The Lady's Ninth Story," pp. 116-119.

9 *Letters* (London, 1934), pp. 158-161. For a slightly earlier but fuller treatment of the subject by a foreigner, see M. du Vigneau, *Secrétaire Turc, contenant l'Art d'exprimer ses Pensées sans se voir, sans se parler, et sans s'écrire*. Paris, 1688. For a recent Turkish commentary, see Sabilha Tansuğ, "The Language of Flowers," *American Turkish Association News* (Washington), XV, 2 (February, 1981), 8-10.

That the symbolic communication detailed by Lady Mary was a love letter is not unusual, for issues of love and marriage are frequently imaged in symbols in Turkish tales. When a padişah's three daughters, all close to each other in age, have grown to maturity and wish to be married, in a tale called "The Widow's Unruly Son,"<sup>10</sup> they discreetly inform their father of this fact by sending him a tray upon which they have placed three melons--one slightly less than ripe, one perfectly ripe, and one just slightly overripe. When the padişah receives this message, he says nothing but starts at once to prepare for their wedding ceremonies. Although this symbol is recorded in the **Motif Index of Folk Literature**,<sup>11</sup> it is not shown to be a very widely distributed motif.<sup>12</sup>

A chair is another symbol associated with marriage in Turkish tales. A home containing a marriageable girl supposedly has in its main room<sup>13</sup> a very special chair which is to be sat upon only by someone who has come to ask for the hand of the girl--whether that person be the prospective bridegroom or, more likely, a matchmaker. The chair is used only for this purpose, and therefore anyone who sits on it makes the object of his mission perfectly clear without having uttered a single word. To prevent its being sat upon by any ordinary quest, this special chair is sometimes suspended from the ceiling (as in the tale called "The Son of the Carpenter"<sup>14</sup>) and must be deliberately pulled down to be used. As another means of making the matchmaker's chair distinctive, it is often contrasted in color from a nearby second chair. It is usually gold-colored, and the second chair, silver-colored. In some cases the second chair may also have some symbolic significance. In the tale known as "The Son of the Fisherman,"<sup>15</sup> sitting in the second chair indicates that one has come to make war on the occupants of the house or the residents of the surrounding area.<sup>16</sup>

Symbolic language may sometimes be used seriously by characters within the tale but may have a comic effect for the audience. Such ambiguity is produced by a tale titled "The Auspicious Dream."<sup>17</sup> A poor-boy-who-makes-good protagonist provides for the padişah correct answers to several riddles and puzzles propounded

10 ATON No. 44; Aarne-Thompson Type 538; Eberhard-Boratav Type 258. For other instances of the symbol of three melons, see ATON No. 671-- "The Trials of the Padişah's Youngest Daughter" and ATON No. 227-- "The Red-Horse Husband Lost to and Recovered from the Other World."

11 This motif is H 611.1-- Melons Ripe and Overripe Analogous to Girls Ready for Marriage.

12 One of the few variants cited was collected in nearby Iraq and may well be of Turkish origin. See Ethel Stevens, **Folk Tales of Iraq** (London, 1931), p.60.

13 There are exceptions to its being located in the main room. In two of the ATON variants it is placed outside the house before the main entrance.

14 ATON No. 46; Aarne-Thompson Types 301 and 302; Eberhard, Boratav Types 72 and 213.

15 ATON No. 65; Aarne-Thompson Type 465; Eberhard-Boratav Type 86.

16 ATON tales (other than those mentioned above) which contain chair symbolism are ATON No. 217-- "The Snake Husband Lost to and Recovered from the Other World"; ATON No. 224-- "The Silent Beauty and the Three Riddling Answers"; ATON No. 541 -- "The Forty Sons of the Padişah"; and ATON No. 928-- "The Ungrateful Keloglan and Brother Fox."

17 ATON No. 73; Aarne-Thompson Type 725; Eberhard-Thompson Type 197.

by a foreign government, and in doing so, he prevents the imminent invasion of Turkey. Members of the foreign court are amazed at the brilliant answers and they request a visit from this unknown genius so that they may ask him other questions and possibly learn much from his replies.

When the boy was informed of the invitation, he said that he would go if he were given a camel, a goat, and a cat to accompany him. When he received these animals, he strapped the cat and the goat on the camel's back and set forth. As he arrived in the foreign capital, great crowds of people lined the streets in order to get a glimpse of the Turkish genius. When they saw that he was only a child, however, they were disappointed. To a man who said, "You are very small to be a genius", the boy pointed to the camel and responded, "**He** is very large. You could ask him your questions." To a man who said, "Why, you do not even have a mustache," he pointed to the cat and answered, "**He** has a mustache, You could ask him your questions." To a third person who said, "How can a wise man be beardless?" he pointed to the goat and said, "**He** has a fine beard. You could ask him your questions."<sup>18</sup>

Inasmuch as suitor tests usually require a measure of ingenuity, it is not surprising that their demands sometimes involve the challenge of symbolic discourse. In a long tale by Behçet Mahir, probably Turkey's greatest storyteller of the twentieth century,<sup>19</sup> the denouement depends upon the outcome of such an exchange. After the protagonist of "The Three Princes"<sup>20</sup> has overcome great obstacles to penetrate the labyrinthine hideaway of the female romantic lead, he proposes marriage to her. The girl dismisses him from her presence but promises to become his bride if he fulfills her requirements. "I shall send you," she says, "three questions. Without moving your tongue or allowing any sound to pass your lips, you must provide answers to these questions."

The girl proceeds to send by a maid her first question. It is in the form of a glass partly filled with poison. After considering this briefly, the prince pours milk upon the poison and gestures for the maid to return it to her mistress.

(Question: "If I should become poison, what would you do?")

Answer: "I should provide an antidote to your poison.")

In another glass the girl then sent her suitor a large diamond. Removing the gem, the young man replaced it with another of equal worth.

(Question: "I am the daughter of a king, and I have such things as this diamond. Who are you?")

18 Variants of this tale are ATON No. 901-- "The Prophetic Dream" and ATON No. 933-- "The Auspicious Dream."

19 See Ahmet E. Uysal. "The Making of a Turkish Folk Narrator : Behçet Mahir of Erzurum," *International Folklore Review*, III (1983), 26-33.

20 ATON No. 330; Aarne-Thompson Types 655 and 655-A; Eberhard-Boratav Type 348.

Answer: "I too am the child of a ruler, and I too have such things as diamonds.")

Finally the girl removed a ring from her finger, placed it on a beautiful plate, and sent it to the prince. Putting her ring upon his finger, he withdrew another ring from his own hand and sent it to her.

(Question: "I shall take you as my husband. Will you now have me as your wife?")

Answer: "If you will take me as I am, as the ruler of myself, I shall receive you in the same way")

Sometimes the sender of a symbolic message may deliberately confuse the recipient in order to precipitate a verbal exchange. "The Persecuted Wife"<sup>21</sup> is a tale which climaxes in such a contretemps. The protracted persecution of the wife begins when her husband, a padişah, believes the lies of her jealous sisters, who report that the twins she bore were not human but canine. Many years later he is confronted with his gross error by his daughter-in-law, Güllüzar.

She placed some red lentils upon a golden tray which lay upon a golden table. When the padişah observed this, he said, "My daughter, lentils do not belong with this golden tray and this golden table. Do you think that it is natural to place such things together?"

"Well, do you think it natural that my mother-in-law should give birth to a pair of puppies?"

The impact of this response on the padişah is so great that he acknowledges his injustice, seeks forgiveness, and is reunited with his own long-suffering wife.<sup>22</sup>

Dialogue in cryptic metaphor is the most relaxed of the three forms of secret language in Turkish oral narrative. Although it may occasionally be the central element of a tale, as it is in "The Farmer Plucks a Goose," below, it is more often incidental to the main action, and it rarely controls the outcome of vital issues. When a padişah and an unimaginative vizier meet a plowman on their travels in "The Farmer Plucks a Goose,"<sup>23</sup> the ruler and the elderly rustic engage in figurative discourse.

"Father, it looks as if it has snowed on the mountain there. Are you aware of that?" (Farmer's hair is white.)

"It is time for snow, sir. It is time." (I am old.)

"Father, are you managing now with two or three?"

"I manage now with three." (His cane is a third leg.)

21 ATON No. 949; Aarne-Thompson Type 707; Eberhard-Boratav Type 239.

22 Symbolic language is also found fairly frequently in the folktales of central and south-central Asia. See especially C. Swynnerton. **Romantic Tales from the Panjab**. Westminster, 1903; and A. Stein and G.A.Griffin. **Hatim's Tales : Kashmiri Stories and Songs**. London, 1923.

23 ATON No. 681; Aarne-Thompson Type 921-F\*.

"What is the news about the thirty-two?" (His teeth.)

"Sir, there is no news. Not one of the thirty-two is left."

"Father, how many times has your property been lightened?"  
(Reduced by the great expense of marrying off daughters.)

"Twice, and I shall soon be lightened again." (Two were wed and a third will soon be married.)

"How are you managing the distant, and how are you managing the near at hand?" (How are his close vision and his distant vision?)

"I can handle the distant myself, but with the near at hand I need help." (He uses reading glasses only.)

"Tell me one more thing, father. If I were to send you a goose, would you be able to pluck it?" (The "goose" here is a fool or dullard.)

"Sir, I am an expert at that sort of thing-- a regular expert!"

Upon the return of the travelers to the royal palace, the vizier asks the padişah for an explanation of this conversation. Ordered to return to the farmer to have his questions answered, the vizier has to pay heavily for an interpretation of each exchange in the repartee. He is the "goose" who is plucked of fifty golden coins.

An entirely different kind of figurative expression occurs in "A Successor for İncili Çavuş."<sup>24</sup> Sent out to seek his future successor as advisor to the padişah, *İncili overtakes along the road an old man with whom he then travels for some distance. İncili Çavuş makes a series of observations as they travel along together, but his companion fails to understand any of them and dismisses them as sheer nonsense. When they approach a river, İncili says, "Father, why doesn't one of us become a bridge upon which the other can cross this river?" (He is offering to carry the old man across.) When they come to a hill, İncili proposes that the old man tell a story to reduce the difficulty of climbing, meaning that the narrative will take their minds off the rigors of struggling up the incline. As they enter a forest inhabited by wild beasts, İncili asks, "Why doesn't one of us become two, and then those two men become four?" (He means that they should arm themselves with clubs and stones in order to multiply their defensive power.) Passing a cemetery, İncili asks if any of the people buried there are alive. (Dead saints are reputed to remain living corpses worthy of prayers from passersby.) As they enter the old man's village, he points out his barley field, and İncili asks, "Have you eaten any of it yet, or are you going to eat it in the future?" (İncili is referring to the grain, of course, but his dull-witted companion thinks he is speaking literally of the field itself.) This dialogue is indirectly functional to the progress of the plot of the tale, for when the*

24 ATON No. 851; *Aarne-Thompson Types 857 and 857-D; Eberhard Boratav Type 235.* Those familiar with the Turkish oral tradition will recognize İncili Çavuş as a colorful folk figure who was supposedly a member of the famous and infamous Janissary Corps during the seventeenth century.



very perceptive daughter of the old man interprets for him the cryptic remarks, she reveals herself to be a worthy successor of İncili Çavuş.

Although time and space do not permit further elaboration here, there are still other varieties of figurative speech preserved in Turkish oral narrative. For those interested in pursuing further this element of folklore, three additional **ATON** tales are listed below.<sup>25</sup>

There is often much more to a folktale than the bare bones of plot and the interaction of a cast of characters. The overall quality of a tale may be enhanced by a number of lesser components such as a variety of narrative devices, interpolated materials, formulaic descriptions, and the colorful use of language. Sign and gesture, symbolic messages, and the dialogue of cryptic metaphor all add small dimensions of richness to a storyteller's repertoire.

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25 ATON No. 123--"The Daughters of the Broom Thief"; ATON No. 182-- "İncili Çavuş and the Price of Deciphering Figurative Language"; and ATON no. 805-- "The Youngest Princess and Her Donkey-Skull Husband."