

Поговорим об астрологии:  
каким образом этнографический подход  
может улучшить изучение гаданий?

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*Аннотация.* Астрология часто классифицируется как псевдонаука или вообще считается лженаукой. Однако астрология – это высокоразвитая система знаний, в которой делаются выводы, а именно предсказания, основанные на серьезно рассчитанных вероятностях. Более того, она проявляется во взаимном диалоге между астрологом (наблюдателем), держателем карты (наблюдаемым) и неосознанным миром. В конкретной тюрко-мусульманской космологии этот неосознанный (непознаваемый человеком) мир совпадает с царством небесных тел, состоящих из ангелов, букв, божественных имен, ароматов и чисел. Практика астрологии – чтение письменной последовательности планетарных символов и связанная с ней устная трактовка. Устная трактовка очень важна для практики астрологии и требует внимания от всех заинтересованных лиц, потому что сфера астрологии затрагивает мир, который говорит и слушает. В данном исследовании мы рассматриваем ситуации, в которых мы можем обратиться к астрологии в рамках конкретной проблемы, рассмотренной Школой астрологии в Стамбуле (Турция), которая исследует три культурных объекта (речь, взгляд, намерение), взаимодействующих с одушевленными картами и судьбами. Кроме того, эта исследовательская работа направлена на то, чтобы продемонстрировать, как этнографические исследования могут улучшить изучение систем знаний.

*Ключевые слова:* астрология, семиотика, система знаний, импликация, этнография, ислам, тенгризм

*Для цитирования:* Акдоган О. Поговорим об астрологии. Каким образом этнографический подход может улучшить изучение гаданий? // Вестник РГГУ. Серия «Литературоведение. Языкознание. Культурология». 2019. № 4. С. 84–94.

Speaking of astrology.  
In what way can an ethnographic approach  
enhance divination studies?

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**Abstract.** Astrology is often regarded as untrue and is classified as a pseudoscience. However, astrology is a highly developed system of knowledge in which deductions, namely predictions that rely upon strong possibilities, are made. Moreover, it occurs in a reciprocal dialogue between the astrologer (observer), the chart holder (observed) and the more-than-human world. In the particular Turko-Muslim cosmology, this more-than-human world coincides with the realm of celestial bodies that are constituted of angels, letters, Divine Names, fragrances and numbers. The practice of astrology is the reading of this written script of planetary symbols and the therewith associated speech act. The speech act is very central to the practice of astrology and urges vigilance from all concerned individuals because the realm of astrology presupposes a world that speaks and listens. This research paper investigates what happens when astrology is being spoken within the particular case study of the School of Astrology in Istanbul (Turkey) and examines 3 cultural entities (speech, gaze, intention) that interact with animate charts and destinies. Moreover, this research paper aims to demonstrate how ethnographic work can enhance the study of knowledge systems.

**Keywords:** Astrology, Semiotics, Knowledge system, Implication, Ethnography, Islam, Tengrism

**For citation:** Akdogan O. Speaking of astrology. In what way can an ethnographic approach enhance divination studies? *RSUH/RGGU Bulletin. "Literary Theory. Linguistics. Cultural Studies" Series*. 2019;4:84-94.

*A brief chronicle of events: an introduction*

The Turkish divination practices show very heterogeneous and uncommon elements, but astrology is considered to be the most important of all the divination techniques [1 p. 34]. Since astrology is believed to be the original science, the Turkic have a long tradition of this study that goes back to 732. The recurrent use of the symbolic numbers 7 and 9 in the *Orkhon* inscriptions are believed to indicate that the first Turks had an uranography of 7 or 9 planets. Different scripts as the *Oghuz name* written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century suggest that Turks believed different celestial events had percussions on the lives of the inhabitants on earth [2 p. 154–184].

With the conversion to Islam, the importance of astrology takes a whole other dimension, leaving a tenacious imprint on the Turkish ontological understanding. Within the Ottoman Empire, the sultans largely relied on the services offered by the *müneccim*, namely the astrologers. The office of *müneccimbaşı* (head astrologer) was officialized, whose function was among others to determine the call to prayer and to develop annual calendars and timetables for the fasting month of the Ramadan. They drew birth charts and horoscopes for the sultans, the sultans' sons and other state officials, or for important events such as the enthronement of the sultans. Their services covered also the determination of the most favorable time upon which wars or negotiations should start, mosques should be built, treaties should be signed, and more. The astrologers were then state officials, meeting the needs of the ruling class as well as members of the *ulema* and *ilmiye*, namely the scholars or intelligentsia. As the predictive part of the *müneccim*'s function was disapproved by the religious community but of great interest to the sultans, the formula *Allahu alem* was added to every prediction. This expression was of vital importance and served as proof to the acknowledgment of *Allah* as the main effectual power operating through the movements of celestial bodies [3 p. 53–64].

After the Republic of Turkey was declared in 1923, and the death of the last *müneccimbaşı* Hüseyin Hilmi Efendi in 1924, no other *müneccim* was appointed, which led to the abolishment of the office of the *müneccim* once and for all. The birth of the new modern and secular nation-state inevitably gave rise to a new official discourse that appointed the Ottoman society as something to get rid of and the modern nation-state as yet to be achieved. Even though astrology had been discarded from its privileged position, it found its way back recently into the public space. Having a mathematical basis provides astrology scientific, modern and rational features. These faculties answer the demands of the growing middle class and elite. According to the findings of the anthropologist Caterina Guenzi, the use of computer programs and software contributes to the recognition of astrology as a modern and innovative knowledge in spite of its ancient origins. Today, astrology is flourishing in Istanbul, being part of the lives of the urban elites that see themselves as the representatives of modernity [4 p. 400–401].

### *Defining astrology: a knowledge system*

Counter to how we might think in Western European societies, astrology is not regarded everywhere as esoteric or spiritual knowledge. Guenzi claims that in India for instance, astrology is a system of thought which is very pragmatic and strongly anchored in everyday life, prac-

ticed for the resolution of concrete and common issues [4 p. 20]. Moreover, the assumption of astrology as an esoteric phenomenon upholds the belief that it is solely practiced at the margins of modernized society. According to Latour, modernity as such is based upon a ceaseless work of purification of human realities by creating two entirely distinct ontological zones, namely that of human beings versus that of nonhumans. Since, according to him, all human realities are necessarily hybrid and complex *in se ipso*, he calls upon a new ontological shift [5 p. 10–11]. In this research paper, astrology is considered as a divination practice that by consequence constitutes a different knowledge system than the one we are accustomed to. I am purposely opting for the concept knowledge system and not belief system because to claim that one is studying beliefs is to deny astrology any truth and it is the result of the above-mentioned purification practice [6 p. 4].

The historian Raymond Bloch has introduced 2 ideal types of divination, namely inspired on the one hand and inductive on the other. Inspired divination requires a human actor with certain abilities that allow him or her to access the other-world directly. Astrology belongs to inductive divination in which material and external signs are interpreted, observed or even technically produced [7 p. 26]. This means that, as a knowledge system, astrology has a clear-cut technique that allows it to be studied and practiced. The following question imposes itself: how can anthropology contribute to the study of astrology, knowing that only a few authors have tackled the issue of astrology in its unity, devoting as much importance to the divinatory practice as to its mathematical and scientific content [4 p. 29–30]? The ethnographic part has largely been left out of most anthropological research regarding this study object. The latter is rather ironic, for as Sophie Caratini puts it forth, the originality of the anthropological methodology is field-work, which emphasizes the attempt of firstly apprehension and then comprehension of human realities [8 p. 11]. Participant observation in the realm of knowledge systems is considered to be problematic and therewith renders uneasiness within the scientific community caused by the ethnocentrism within the scientific discourse and its conditions of knowledge production [9 p. 99].

To have a mere attentive-ear-posture, which is mainly only based on observation, is not enough. Moreover, this latter is related to a psycho-analytic approach or is at the very least an extremely asymmetrical ethnographic conduct [10 p. 5]. The latter is also put forth by the anthropologist Anne-Marie Vuilleminot in which she postulates that once the ethnographer is involved within the community that he or she studies, and interacts from the role(s) ascribed to him or her by the informants themselves, tongues get untied. This happens especially when within a framework of equals – i.e. colleagues – ordinary difficulties are being

shared among one another [9 p. 103–104]. Favret-Saada considers that anthropology has always carried out the premise that there should be an asymmetry between the ethnographer and his or her object. According to her, during the colonial era, the study object of the ethnographer has been considered as inferior. Afterward, this paternalism has translated itself in an epistemology of distance that should protect the researcher from any affect. Thus, one can assume that *reasoning* is considered to be more valuable than *affectation*, and since modernity prescribes to purify human realities of nonhumans – the ethnographic practice becomes *unreasonable* [10 p. 3].

The empiric data presented in this paper were gathered during field-work of 4 months in 2013–2014. In order to do so, the ethnographer was embedded in a community of astrologers and astrologers-in-being through enrollment at the School of Astrology as an astrology student. By doing so and practicing astrology, the inner workings of astrology have become accessible.

### *The symbolic script of astrology*

The technique of astrology relies upon distinctive writing based on a symbolic script. This script with symbols is comprised of a pictographic system in which ideograms are depicted. An ideogram can be defined as follows:

a pictorial character refers not to the visible entity that it explicitly pictured but to some quality or other phenomenon readily associated with that entity [11 p. 97].

According to the anthropologist and philosopher David Abram, writing originated from the interplay between the human community and the animate landscape. Hence, our writing system remains tidily linked to the mysteries of a more-than-human world [11 p. 95–96]. To illustrate this, one can recall the symbol or ideogram of the planet Sun in astrology, namely a circle with a dot right in its middle, reminding us of an eye.

The qualities that are associated with the planet sun and to which the ideogram refers are its visibility, perceptibility, clarity and singularity. Certainly, in order to create this language of astrology, we rely upon analogism. The latter is a mode of identification in which the whole of existing beings is divided into a multiplicity of analogies that link together the intrinsic properties of the entities that are distinguished in it. In such systems, similarities are traced by observation relying upon inventiveness and continuity [12 p. 201]. In this way, the ideogram – that originates from the qualities attributed to the planet – deduces

the meanings and representations byways of analogy and pours them accordingly into the writing system of astrology. Once these ideograms have been written down and their meanings are fixed, these human-made symbols are granted a sense of autonomy and independence both from the speaker as from the sensuous surrounding. This means that the celestial bodies that had been one's main interlocutor before, have now given way to the ideograms. Thus, the observer now obtains the capacity to perceive and to dialogue with the more-than-human world by means of writing and reading [11 p. 111–112].

Consequently, the practice of astrology is considered to be all that is related to the drawing, the reading and the interpretation of the astrological charts. Today, through the ideograms it is possible to construct and develop astrology without being directly in touch with the sky. However, as the observer perceives this script, recognizes the meanings by the simple act of reading, he or she enters in a reciprocal dialogue with the more-than-human world of discourse [11 p. 117–132]. Moreover, this field of discourse implies reciprocity and transformation as there is an ongoing intersubjective dialogue whereby the objective world becomes a collective field of experience [11 p. 36–39]. As a matter of example, this collective field of experience concerning celestial bodies can be demonstrated by resorting to the Turkish language. The celestial bodies are perceived as being alive since the event of sunrise is referred to as *gün/güneş doğdu* which means literally that the day/sun is born. The same expression applies to the moon [2 p. 158].

By means of example, the above-mentioned ongoing intersubjective dialogue is also demonstrated by the divide between classical and modern astrology. When the planets beyond Saturn (or the generational planets) which are Uranus (1780), Neptune (1860) and Pluto (1930) were discovered, each planet was adopted into the system of astrology by representing its broad historical framework in which the discovery took place. For instance, Uranus represents characteristics such as independence, freedom, rebellion and disobedience to authority, since among others the French Revolution started dawning around that period [13 p. 111].

### *Animate charts: the interplay of Tengrism and Islam*

Since the Islamic astrology has a twofold structure, the planetary spheres are part of the corporeal world but – at the same time – belong to the more subtle world. The traditional astrological cosmology does not make an explicit differentiation between the planetary skies in their corporeal or visible reality and that which corresponds to them in the subtle order. The latter is essential as it demonstrates once again that



the symbol – or ideogram when defined narrowly – is identified with the object it symbolizes. Moreover, a distinction between the object and its representative is avoided [14 p. 15–16]. The universe according to the Turko-Muslim tradition consists of different forces serving the purpose behind all stars, planets, passageways, sounds, fragrances, letters, numbers, elements and qualities. These letters and numbers also form the divine names (*esmalar*), that are the names or attributes of God through which He manifests Himself. These forces are the components that determine the essences of the cosmic spheres. It is said that the universe is carried by 360 angels which correspond to the 360 degrees of the zodiac [15 p. 309]. The divine names consist of letters and letters in their turn correspond to numerical values [16 p. 15]. Similar to the Kabbalah, namely the esoteric body of Jewish mysticism, each of the 28 Arabic letters is a guide into an entire sphere of existence. According to some Kabbalistic accounts, it was by combining the letters that the Holy One created the ongoing universe and the letters would continually reveal new secrets when meditated upon [11 p. 133]. This goes also for the Arabic letters, which were brought to Turkey through the influence of Islam. The core mode of gaining knowledge is through *opening*, which is synonymous for unveiling, tasting, witnessing, divine effusion, divine self-disclosure and insight [17 p. xvii].

The substance that deploys all the possibilities of manifestation implied in the above-mentioned entities of the Islamic cosmology is the Divine Breath. Moreover, the latter acts as the unifier between the cosmic degrees, the 28 sounds of the Arabic alphabet, and the divine names. Basically, through this substance the series of corresponding degrees, names and sounds go from the first manifestation of the Intellect down to the creation of man and thus comprise the different heavens, that is to say; the heavens of the zodiac, the heavens of the fixed stars and the planetary skies [14 p. 37–38].

### *The air as the divine breath*

As Turkey belongs to the anciently Turkic culture, which held a Tengrist religion in which the eternal blue sky plays a divine role, it was only obvious to see a connection between the air and the above-mentioned divine breath [18 p. 105]. Moreover, Ibn al-Arabi makes a distinction between a divine or macrocosmic breath and a human or microcosmic breath [14 p. 37]. The breath is very important in astrology as well, since a natal chart is drawn upon the moment when an individual takes his or her first breath.

Abram claims that for oral peoples, the air is the archetype of all that is indescribable, unknowable, yet undeniably real and effectual as

a result of its pervading presence, its utter invisibility, and its manifest influence on different visible phenomena. The air, the wind and the breath are recognized as aspects of one singular sacred power. Furthermore, he claims that the air has obvious ties to speech, since spoken words are structured breath and spoken phrases take their communicative power from this invisible medium that moves in and/or between us [11 p. 227]. For instance, the divine name *Hû* is Arabic for *He* and refers to Allah and means *be like the air*. This means that one of His attributes is to be like the air. There is thus an omnipresent divine element that manifests itself through the air that carries God's faculties namely the divine names, blending with our breath, thoughts, and words. Because the air is omnipresent and the sky is eternal, we do not know where the air stops nor where it begins, and consequently where our uttered words or thoughts may be taken.

#### *Uttering words: the speech act*

In the Turkic-Mongol tradition, it is important that one speaks beautifully. Here, beautiful is to be considered as a speech that will not be confronting nor challenging. The anthropologist Vuilleminot notes that the idea behind the importance given to the beautiful speech act is the maintenance of the social balance and the avoidance of any conflict with figures of spirits and deities [19 p. 199].

In spoken Turkish language, some formulas are articulated to counter the figures of spirits. *Şeytanın kulağına kurşun* for instance literally means a bullet in the ear of the devil but in its corresponding symbolic meaning, it would be an act of speech in which the devil is deafened and prevented to hear what has just been said. This formula is used when something charged with negativity is has been spoken out loud and is intended to restore balance. On the contrary, when wishes, dreams, hopes, positive affirmations are expressed, one always says *inşallah* (if *Allah* wants it) in the end or as a response to it. The earlier-mentioned formula *Allahu alem* is probably also derived from this thought. These formulations are used daily and are interwoven within every Turkish conversation, in order to conduct discussions in a balanced way without confronting the other surrounding beings and forces. Even today, the Turkic cosmology is very complex. From the astrological point of view, space is filled with other entities and forces that are unseen to the human eye. Astrology is then the science that establishes a relation between the human being and the universe, as a gateway to Truth (*Hakikat*). There are thus forces serving the purpose behind all stars, planets, gateway, sounds, fragrances, letters, numbers, elements and qualities that are in every layer of existence. Therefore, entering this



realm inevitably requires a sort of sensitivity, for any word spoken here will influence the individual's deep self. The observer (interpreter) influences the observed (charts and chart holders) and sees within the limits of his or her own knowledge. The level of consciousness, participation in the event, the perception of existence held by the person who is reading the chart are very influential. The observer influences the observed with his or her commentaries. Influences of stars await silently and suspended. Once the interpreter perceives and speaks the words, he or she as it were, gives a command and this influence enters into registration [15 p. 309–313]. There is thus reciprocity between the interpreter, the chart holder, the chart and the surrounding forces that manifest themselves through celestial bodies. The reciprocity is made possible through the uttering of words since we find ourselves alive in a speaking and listening world. Language is affective and evocative as it prolongs unto the invisible and is interpenetrating since it is sustained and carried by air. David Abrams adds to this that:

as we ourselves dwell and move within language, so ultimately, do the other animals and animate things of the world; if we do not notice them there, it is only because language has forgotten its expressive depths. It is not more true that we speak than that the things, and the animate world itself, speaks with us [11 p. 86].

### *The intention and gaze*

The connection between the intention (*niyet*), the word (*söz*), the gaze (*göz*) as I see it, lies in the word *öz*. The latter means essence. Since words are carried through the breath and the air, they inevitably, in their turn, carry an essence. There is an idiom in Turkish saying *özü sözü bir olmak*, which literally means someone whose essence corresponds to his or her words, and clearly establishes a connection between essence and words. When both correspond to one another, the intention is considered to be good or somewhat clear. The same also goes for the gaze. The latter is a carrier of a force that is transformative, namely the essence. There is a verb in Turkish *göz değiştirmek* which literally means to touch someone with the eye or the gaze and gives to the eye other faculties than solely seeing. Gazing and speaking are therefore no innocent actions. There is something substantial in it; which is the essence. They are interactive, reciprocal and as a consequence transformative. Both the gaze as the speech act can transform, change, influence a person and thereupon his or her destiny.

The substance of what the essence really is, cannot be known [17 p. 62]. Only that it is something substantial and I believe it express-

es itself in or is related to the *niyet*. The latter is derived from the Arabic word *niyya* and is commonly translated to English as intent, intention, will or direction of will [20 p. 82]. The Turkish etymological dictionary explains *niyet* as plan or design. The Arabic word *niyya* is derived from the verb *nawa*, as in *He intended and then designed*, which expresses the original intention of Allah. Therefore, I deduce that in the *niyet* the essence is manifest. An essence that relates to the original essence, or to Allah. According to the anthropologist Graw, intentionality is considered to be central within the phenomenological theory by virtue of the human consciousness that emerges from the state of being aware of one's own existence. Therefore, this human consciousness is structured by intentionality, for acts of consciousness are never without content considering that they include something that is intended by and within the act itself. In the same way, they include something that is intended by and within the act. Furthermore, an act of perception never takes place in the abstract but is necessarily a perception of something and results in a participative dialogue between what is perceived and the perceiver within the act of perception. The object of a perceived act then becomes the object of that consciousness and can therefore not be separated from the act itself [20 p. 83].

### *Conclusion*

Thus, the performed analysis as a result of an ethnographic conduct, allows me to conclude that perceiving, drawing and interpreting astrological charts are an active act and the perceived object, namely the chart cannot be separated from the act itself. Put differently, a dialogue or a touch by the gaze or by the words of the perceiver – which are not without substance nor intentionality – occur, even though I cannot further specify in what way. Because we do not know in what way this occurrence takes place and because it is favorable to keep the relations with humans and more-than-humans balanced and harmonious, it is in one's favor to prevent these kinds of situations. Only through the learning process and practice of the astrological technique, these cosmological subtleties of a world that speaks and listens reveal themselves to the ethnographer.

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