

Between the Signifier and the Signified Falls the Signification: Reflections on the Use of Political Terms in the Egyptian 2011 Events

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Abstract

The present paper explores the discrepancy between original sense and actual use of certain political terms with particular reference to the Egyptian 25th of January uprising/revolution. The researcher casts light on the frequently controversial if not even self-contradictory use of these terms to denote hardly related concepts and, at times at least, the down right antonym of the original concept in question. An attempt is also made, whenever possible, to compare and contrast, if necessary, the same political terms in relation to the 23rd of July 1952 revolution. The researcher adopts an analytical comparative/contrastive approach. This paper, broadly speaking, makes use of semantics and pragmatics to reflect on the topic under study.

Key words: Political terminology; Democracy; Revolution; Uprising; Justice; Freedom of thought and speech; Signifier; Signified and signification

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INTRODUCTION

Topic of the Research

Reflections on what seems to the researcher to be quite a chaotic and often self-contradictory use of political terms, with particular reference to a major Egyptian event: the 25th of January 2011 uprising/revolution.

Hypotheses and Objectives of the Research

This research or reflection paper attempts to explore the often wide difference between appearance and reality when it comes to the use of certain political terms, between the traditionally accepted sense of a given term and the way it is actually used in the context of the political event in question.

Scope of the Research

Due to time and space limitations, the present paper is confined to a few political terms and/or slogans only: Revolution vs. Uprising, Democracy, freedom of thought and expression and, finally, Justice.

1. A SNAPSHOT AT THE RELEVANT BACKGROUND

In the following synopsis, the researcher presents a brief survey of the key linguistic terms employed in the very title of the present research as well as a quick snapshot at the relevant political background.

First, on the linguistic level, the term Signifier denotes “any material thing that signifies, e.g., words on a page, a facial expression, an image”, whereas the term Signified means “the concept that a signifier refers to”. According to Saussure, the relationship between the signifier and

the signified is referred to as “signification” (Herman & David, 2002). Saussure argues that his choice of the terms *signifier* and *signified* helps to indicate “the distinction which separates each from the other” (Saussure, 1983, p.67). Even so, he stresses that sound and thought (or the signifier and the signified) are as inseparable as the two sides of a piece of paper. They were “intimately linked” in the mind “by an associative link’ - “each triggers the other”. Hence, if the two do not match, lack of communication is bound to occur and the process of signification is lost. The researcher attempts to explore whether, with regard to the political terms in question in this paper, the way these terms is/was used during the January 2011 events results in proper communication or is it the case that between the signifier and the signified falls the signification.

On the political level, political terms and/or slogans have always been an interesting topic yet an equally controversial one. At the beginning, democracy was not really the rule of the people by the people and for the people, but only a privileged section of the people. It has taken humanity a lot of time and a hard struggle for the true liberation of Mankind to reach what most of us may now regard as true democracy and to come up with the declaration of the rights of man, as we know them now. Yet, even after a long history of struggle across several centuries, in the second half of the twentieth century, the totalitarian regime in what was once East Germany was ironically called democratic, and in China, where the majority of the Chinese people were subjected to the totalitarian rule of the communist party, the official name was the People Republic of China. Yet all this had to do with the Eastern Block that was once as the Socialist Block. Things must have been much better in the other half of the world during the cold war, one, may optimistically expect. Yes, such great expectations, but again and again, between the appearance and the reality, between the potency and the existence, between the essence and the decent, falls the shadow, and, in our case, linguistically speaking, between the signifier and the signified, falls the signification. The right to veto any resolution is given only to five major powers in a world that claims to seek equality and fraternity! It seems that some countries are more equal than the others, God bless Orwell! Even in the United States of America, where freedom and individuality have a priority over several other values, half a century ago, we had people like Joseph McCarthy¹ who thrived on accusations of political opponents and had actually persecuted quite a few of them until he himself was disqualified.

2. REFLECTIONS AND FINDINGS

The question arises: what about the Arab Spring Revolutions? Or should we say Uprisings? May be even the term “Spring”, here, could be substituted by “Autumn”! Yet “Spring”, “Autumn” and for that purpose even “Fall”, are definitely not political terms per se. So the present research/reflection paper would better only focus on the explicitly political in this respect, although for quite a number of intellectuals, in Egypt at least, the present situation with the dominion of political Islamists and what may seem to be a tendency to narrow down the margin of freedom available for the press in particular and media in general induces them to regard it as an autumn of the very revolutionary ideas and ambitions that had ignited the uprising against the regime of ex-president Hosni Mubarak.

2.1 Revolution vs. Uprising: Definition: Between the Idea & the Reality

On the theoretical and/or academic level, what is the difference between an uprising on the one hand and a proper revolution on the other? A possible definition of the term revolution is as follows:

“*a*: a sudden, radical, or complete change *b*: a fundamental change in political organization; *especially*: the overthrow or renunciation of one government or ruler and the substitution of another by the governed *c*: activity or movement designed to effect fundamental changes in the socioeconomic situation *d*: a fundamental change in the way of thinking about or visualizing something: a change of paradigm <the Copernican revolution> *e*: a changeover in use or preference especially in technology <the computer revolution> <the foreign car revolution>”².

On the other hand, what is an uprising? Maybe the following definition could do:

“an act or instance of rising up; *especially*: a usually localized act of popular violence in defiance usually of an established government in social and political science, a major, sudden, and hence typically violent alteration in government and in related associations and structures. The term is used by analogy in such expressions as the Industrial Revolution, where it refers to a radical and profound change in economic relationships and technological conditions”³.

The question now arises: Was the 1952 free Officers Movement a true revolution and is the 2011 one merely an uprising? It is certainly a difficult question to answer and most probably requires a specialist in politics rather than a linguist or even a sociolinguist to reflect on. The 1952 started as a coup d'état per se, but quickly evolved into a really radical change on the social and political levels. The agricultural reform act, the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the departure of the last British soldiers

¹ b. Nov. 14, 1908, near Appleton, Wis., U.S.d. May 2, 1957, Bethesda, Md. in full JOSEPH RAYMOND MCCARTHY U.S. senator who dominated the early 1950s by his sensational but unproved charges of Communist subversion in high government circles. In a rare move, he was officially censured for unbecoming conduct by his Senate colleagues (Dec. 2, 1954), thus ending the era of McCarthyism.

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² <http://www.learnersdictionary.com/search/revolution>

³ www.upeace.org/library/documents/HRPJ_Reader.pdf

fro Egypt are cases in point. These changes were endorsed by the majority of the Egyptian people, and, hence, the legitimacy of labeling the July 1952 a revolution as such in some political estimations.

The January 2011 uprising, on the other hand, started as a really impulsive and massive rejection of a regime that may actually be traced back to the fifties of last century rather than simply the last 30 of Mubarak or even forty years after Nasser's death in 1970. The Egyptian people, or more accurately the extreme majority of it, has not only endorsed the uprising, but even participated in it one way or the other. In that sense, it looks more appropriate to call it a true revolution, especially when compared or contrasted with the 1952 coup d'état. That is what Ahmed Hegazy, an Egyptian poet and thinker, for instance, maintains in his Wednesdays articles in *Ahram* newspaper.

The problem is that good beginnings do not by necessity lead to good ends. The lack of a real leadership of the angry movement of the people and the absence of a clear-cut ideology underlying it, have both unstrapped the revolution from its revolutionary nature and turned it into a mere uprising that has hardly changed the regime and is soon exploited by dogmatic groups that transform the young people's love of freedom into maybe a worse kind of dictatorship under the mask of religiousness or rather religiosity.

After a given government is overthrown by a revolution, there is usually a period of optimistic idealism, and the revolutionaries engage in much perfectionist rhetoric. But the practical tasks of governing have to be faced, and a split develops between moderates and radicals. It often ends in the defeat of the moderates, the rise of extremists, and the concentration of all power in their hands. The goals of the revolution fade, as a totalitarian regime takes over. Some of the basic tenets of the original revolutionary movement, however, are eventually incorporated. The French and Russian revolutions followed this course of development, as did the Islamic revolution in Iran. A strictly political revolution, independent of social transformation, does not possess the same pattern of prerevolutionary and post-revolutionary events. It may be merely a change in political authority (as in several other cases of coups d'état) or a somewhat broader transformation of the structures of power (as in the American and Mexican revolutions) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2000).

Thus, was it really a revolution or only an uprising? The researcher, as the title of the present paper suggests, tends to consider it some kind of an overwhelming civilian protest movement or uprising that has managed to depose the head of the regime and several leading figures associated with it, but has hardly toppled the regime itself as such. Egypt is still a republican regime, the dominating economic policy is still a capitalist one that is mainly based on the free-market concept and, officially at least, most of the laws governing the functions of the republic

president, the ministers and political life in general have not significantly changed. Hence, it would rather be an overstatement to describe the whole course of events as a revolution in the full sense of the term.

Yet, it may be useful to recall to memory the famous slogan of the demonstrators during the first 18 days of the events whose exact English translation reads as follows: "Bread, freedom, social justice" and sometimes, as a variation, the word "dignity" was inserted between freedom and social justice. A quick look at this slogan that sums up the major demands of the demonstrators and, consequently, the basic goals of the uprising/revolution can lead to the conclusion that all these goals have not yet been achieved, and some may have even be now more far fetched than before January 2011. Bread, whether literally or symbolically as representative of basic food needs for the average Egyptian is in a worse state now, and food prices are getting higher everyday, with the exception of mango which is a superfluous item of sweets as such for most Egyptians, and President Mursi's statement that its price has dropped in the first 100 days of his rule as mockery in the media and on the Internet as well as numerous cartoons ridiculing the presidential statement by showing taxi drivers resorting to mango as a source of car fuel instead of gas or poor families replacing bread and beans (the most common Egyptian dish for the poor) with a mango fruit! The constantly rising prices of food, gas and solar are neither a secret nor a personal impression; the last official statement issued by the Cabinet Information and decision Support Centre in September 2012 literally reports the phenomenon in details and with official figures. As for the second item of the slogan, freedom, no laws have been changed to allow Egyptians more freedom with regard to protests, demonstrations or strikes. Now that the Muslim Brothers are in power, the ministry of interior, in what sounds to be an exact replica of the last two years in Mubarak's reign, announces that Egyptians are free to demonstrate or strike for as long as doing so does not harm the interests of society and agrees with the law. The interests of society is such a vague term that allows interference on the part of the ruling party and administrative authority as has actually taken place when the police forces evacuated the Tahrir Square in the last Friday of September 2012 by force. Worse still is that the first 100 days of president Mursi's rule witnessed the confiscation of a daily newspaper, *Al Dostour*, and the imprisonment of its Chief Editor on the grounds of insulting the president of the republic, which had never happened during the rule of Mubarak, whether for real tolerance (which is highly dubious) or for practical pragmatic considerations to suggest more political tolerance than what really was available or to avoid arousing more human rights supporters against the government then. Yet, regardless of the ulterior motives involved, the fact remains that all this only happened after January 2011, which could hardly be a triumph for

the call to more freedom. A TV channel was shut down, Al Faraein, for the same reason, insulting the president, and 3 other chief editors were also investigated with. All this took place within the first 60 days of the new rule of the Muslim Brothers. As for social justice, nothing has really changed again. The gap between the rich and the poor is still as wide and no maximum or minimum limits of governmental salaries have been really set by any new government after January 2011. In fact, the open market policy is as solid in the policies of the Muslim Brothers as it was with the ex-National Party. All these points above mentioned would not act as a decisive proof that it was not a revolution but only an uprising. Yet, they, indeed, function as evidence supporting the argument set forward by the research. The final decision is, however, left up to the readers of this paper to decide.

2.2 Democracy: Definition, Theory and Practice

Definition: The traditional definition of democracy may be summed up as follows:

“Noun: democracy

1. The political orientation of those who favour government by the people or by their elected representatives
2. A political system in which the supreme power lies in a body of citizens who can elect people to represent them
3. The doctrine that the numerical majority of an organized group can make decisions binding on the whole group” [Word-Web.info]

Another, probably more specialized definition, may be the following:

“Government of the people, by the people, and for the people” is a useful definition of “democracy”, but a close look at the power of money and of those few who have a lot of it (and not just in election campaigns)—something that neither behavioralism or rational choice deign to do—makes it abundantly clear that no part of this definition applies to the society in which we live.” (Olman, Bertell, n.d.).

Democracy literally means the rule by the people (from the Greek *demos*, “people,” and *kratos*, “rule”). The term has three basic senses in contemporary usage: (1) a form of government in which the right to make political decisions is exercised directly by the whole body of citizens, acting under procedures of majority rule, usually known as direct democracy; (2) a form of government in which the citizens exercise the same right not in person but through representatives chosen by and responsible to them, known as representative democracy; and (3) a form of government, usually a representative democracy, in which the powers of the majority are exercised within a framework of constitutional restraints designed to guarantee all citizens the enjoyment of certain individual or collective rights, such as freedom of speech and religion, known as liberal, or constitutional, democracy. Democracy had its beginnings in the city-states of ancient Greece in which the whole citizen body formed the legislature; such a system was possible

because a city-state’s population rarely exceeded 10,000 people, and women and slaves had no political rights. There was no separation of powers, and all officials were fully responsible to the popular assembly. Yet, Greek democracy was a brief historical episode that had little direct influence on the development of modern democratic practices. Two millennia separated the fall of the Greek city-state and the rise of modern constitutional democracy. Modern concepts of democratic government were shaped to a large extent by ideas and institutions of medieval Europe, notably the concept of divine, natural, and customary law as a restraint on the exercise of power. Highly significant was the growing practice by European rulers of seeking approval of their policies—including the right to levy taxes--by consulting the different “estates,” or group interests, in the realm. The first document to notice such concepts and practices is Magna Carta of England, granted by King John in 1215. The profound intellectual and social developments of the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions, notably the emergence of concepts of natural rights and political equality have also been of fundamental significance and influence on democracy as practiced nowadays in most of the world. Two seminal documents of this period are the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789; see Independence, Declaration of; Rights of Man and of the Citizen, Declaration of the). Representative legislative bodies, freely elected under (eventual) universal suffrage, became in the 19th and 20th centuries the central institutions of democratic governments. In many countries, democracy also came to imply competition for office, freedom of speech and the press, and the rule of law. Numerous authoritarian and totalitarian states, notably the communist nations of the 20th century, have adopted outwardly democratic governments that nonetheless were dominated by a single authorized party. States with Marxist ideologies asserted that political consensus and collective ownership of the means of production (i.e., economic democracy) were sufficient to ensure that the will of the people would be carried out (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2000).

How was the term used by the 1952 July revolution? It was, indeed, referred to in the six principles and/or aims of the revolution or rather, as was first called by its very supporters, the movement of the free officers group. The group sought the establishment of “a sound democratic life”. Yet the way to bring this hope into reality was rather weird. To start with, all political parties were dissolved and political leaders were arrested or at least detained, including even the most vehement opposition leaders who had fought for decades against the dethroned king Farouq and the British occupation of Egypt, such as the Wafd party figures whose support of the resistance activities in the Suez Canal area were well-known on different levels. The minority of officers among the free officers group or,

then, the Revolution Council, who objected and advocated the return of the military figures to their regiments and the beginning of a new era of democracy under the new republican system of government were simply sent away as ambassadors to far away countries. Youssef Seddiq and Khalid Mohy El-Din are two cases in point.

Was it quite a different case with the 2011 uprising? At the beginning, the answer seems to be in the affirmative. The young people who ignited the spark of the people's collective uprising against the semi-military semi-dictatorial regime were mainly dreaming of freedom and democracy. They were also dreaming of social justice, but not at the expense of personal freedom and democracy. The parliamentary elections in January 2011 and the presidential one going on now may be fairly regarded as clear-cut evidence to support this claim. Yet, quite unfortunately, just after the end of the first round, the candidates who lost the elections suddenly turned back against elections results, against the whole idea of presidential elections and asked for a presidential council instead, one that excludes one of the two winners and includes the losers! Even on the Facebook, the cradle of the January 2011 uprising, there were several comments condemning the choices and votes of around five million and five hundred thousand people who voted for General Shafiq, the second runner for the second round, as traitors! Thus, it seems quite feasible to wonder whether this is really democracy or totalitarianism. Dr Hoda Jamal Abdel Nasser's article in *Ahram* 2nd of June 2012 as well as Dr Osama Al-Ghazaly Harab's article in the same paper on 6 June 2012 are two examples of condemnation of what they both consider as a fascist attitude adopted by promoters of democracy and freedom. It is worth noting here that Dr Hoda Abdel Nasser is a socialist and is the daughter of the well-known political leader in Egypt and the entire Arab world late Jamal Abdel Nasser. In short, she is a leftist and a pan-Arabism supporter as well, whereas Dr Osama Al-Ghazaly Harab is a liberal who explicitly advocates democracy in the western sense. Both, however, agree on rejecting the hardly democratic attitude of the opponents of Shafiq and even both stated they voted for the same candidate, Amr Mousa, in the first round and that they shall vote for Shafiq in the second and final round. Here again the researcher wonders whether the traditional and standard sense of democracy has or has not been lost in the actual use of it during the events. If the right to practice democracy and enjoy its advantages is confined to a group of people no matter who they are we are back to the roots of democracy in ancient Greek rather than what it denotes in our modern world. Again, between the signifier and the signified the signification seems to have got lost.

2.3 The Freedom of Thought and Expression: Definition: Between the Idea & the Reality

The freedom of thought, in any valuable sense, includes

freedom of speech. At present, in the most civilized countries, the freedom of speech is taken as a matter of course and seems a perfectly simple thing. We are so accustomed to it that we look on it as a natural right. Nevertheless, this right has been acquired only in quite recent times, and the way to its attainment has lain through lakes of blood. It has taken centuries to persuade the most enlightened peoples that liberty to publish one's opinions and to discuss all questions is a good and not a bad thing. Human societies (there are some brilliant exceptions) have been generally opposed to freedom of thought, or, in other words, to new ideas, and it is easy to see why (Bagnell, 2004).

Looking back at the way the 1952 July revolution dealt with the freedom of thought and expression, one finds out that the freedom of expression was only guaranteed to those who identified with the new political regime. Even when Nasser released his famous slogan "Look up in pride fellow citizen", the joke was released that he only wanted to identify those who would dare look up in pride to get rid of! Thinkers were arrested, writers banned, politicians deprived of their political rights, journalists fired, university professors expelled and even judges were, to use Nasser's euphemistic term "purged"!¹

Was it, anyway better where the January 2011 uprising comes in? One should expect the freedom of thought and expression to enjoy a higher rank and a top priority within the framework of a liberal revolution in contrast with the coup d'état of the 1952 revolution. Yet, between the idea and the reality falls all sorts of freedom. From the very beginning of the 25th of January 2011 events, the young men and women on the Facebook listed their adversaries as enemies of the revolution and blacklisted them, including singers, actors, journalists and literary figures. Tamer Hosni, a singer, Talaat Zakareyya, an actor, Makram Mohammed Ahmed, a journalist and Lamis Gaber, a novelist and playwright all cases in point. They were either nicknamed as the fleeing reminiscent of the deposed regime or the anti-revolutionary forces, just as if the 2011 uprising were another coup d'état or a totalitarian/Marxist revolution. Friends severed their life long relations and sometimes families torn apart just because of political differences. Freedom of speech is sheer fancy; intolerance is the keyword. Once again the political term seems to be totally devoid from its original sense and the signification loses its way between the signifier and the signified.

2.4 Justice vs. Injustice: Definition, Theory and Practice: Between the Idea & the Reality

At this stage of the researcher's reflections, it is just fair to end up the paper by dealing with the term "Justice". According to *West's Encyclopedia of American Law*, justice is "The proper administration of the law; the fair and equitable treatment of all individuals under the law". As for *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*,

Unabridged. Merriam-Webster, (2002), "justice" is "the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments".

Such definitions sound quite clear, transparent and persuasive. The problem is that justices may be sometimes mistaken for injustice and vice versa. Under the 1952 July "revolutionary" regime, "Revolutionary Courts" were established, consisting of a few tame judges with a number of army officers only to condemn the "enemies of the revolution" which back then extended to include any kind political opposition. The regime was explicitly a totalitarian one. It was, thus, quite consistent to form such exceptional courts of "justice" just to issue "unjust" sentences in favour of the regime in power at the expense of the freedom of opinion, the freedom of expression, the rights of Man and even the mere concept of "justice" per se.

What about the liberal uprising of January 2011, with its claims to defend human dignity and freedom, and its insistence, at the beginning, on resorting only to civil laws and human right? Was justice respected by the revolutionary youth or properly maintained by people in charge? It is true that "justice delayed is justice denied", but does this justify the call for "Revolutionary Courts" in a revolution that has burst out against a semi-totalitarian regime that originated from a coup d'état that had ultimately turned into a revolution? The trials went very slowly, sometimes even too slowly, and, quite often, the real defendants were never identified, let alone put to trial. But the researcher firmly deems it is totally unjust to ask for quick and fair or just trials that should just end up with death penalty sentences for the defendants or else the mobs consider the verdicts of the courts of justice simply unjust!

3. THE END. OR IS IT JUST A NEW BEGINNING?

Instead of an explicit conclusion, the researcher would rather end up this reflection paper with another question. The researcher's reflections give rise to more questions than present answers to the questions posed at the beginning of the paper. Maybe this is good for a change, maybe this is another instance of the difference between appearance and the reality, between the signifier and the signified. At the end of this paper, the researcher hopes this end may mark the beginning of new research papers that aspire to tackle the same topic and propose to provide the readers as well as other researchers with ample answers to an ever increasing number of questions

that arise from the difference between the idea and the reality, between the potency and the existence and, finally, between the signifier and the signified, where not only falls the signification but even quite a lot of Egyptians, including the researcher himself. Even so, the researcher hopes to have been able to do the topic in question some kind of justice within the limitations of time and space mentioned in the introduction, while adhering to free thought and expression, even if the paper does not necessarily represent a revolutionary point of view! And, last but not least, to go back to the two terms "Spring" and "Fall", the use of "Spring" in the Phrase Arab Spring may be still justified if we regard the political changes that have occurred in several Arab countries in the Middle East as the inevitable outcome of the Fall of the old systems, that has, thus, made it possible for new ones to spring out! Finally, it may also be useful to remember that Spring could also be a cruel season, mixing memory and desire and stirring the dull roots of the Arab peoples' high hopes in democracy and freedom in the cactus land of Arab dictatorships.

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