Binary Oppositions

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For reference:
Our world is full of opposites. Big opposes small, night opposes day, old opposes young. The opposites that are most interesting, however, are binary oppositions. These are specific pairs of opposites that have organized human culture as we know it today. They differ from normal opposites because they assume a deeper meaning. These oppositions create society’s ideals of what is good and what is bad, or what is ethical and non-ethical, and from a young age we subconsciously conform to these without even knowing, and even as adults we continue to create these oppositions in our minds with everything we are presented with. This occurs because people have the tendency to assign values to each of the pairs, creating a type of hidden hierarchy within society.[online 5] This essay will discuss these oppositions, namely color differences and associations, and focus on how certain binary oppositions affect how we interpret things today.

The first binary opposition we will examine is that of black and white. When one thinks of the color black, what images are immediately brought to mind? That of evil, darkness, and night. On the contrary, when one thinks of the color white the images conjured up are those of angels, purity, and goodness [online 5]. Even though the denotative meanings of both these words is essentially just a description of a color, each part of the pair has gained its own unique, exclusive connotative meaning. The binary opposition of black and white even goes so far to extend to race, and some say the connotative meanings of the words also reach this far [online 3]. One may dispute this, saying this is not possible, just because a person is “black” does not mean that they are evil, or the enemy, and we ourselves may not believe it, but it is possible. If one automatically recognizes the hero in an action movie because they are merely wearing the color white, then does that same person not see white as being superior to black? And if white is superior to black in clothing choice for heroes in action movies, why not in skin color for human beings? A binary opposition as simple as black and white still has plenty of grey area [online 5].

The second binary opposition that has affected our society today is that of male vs. female [online 6]. Some pairs of binary oppositions are best discussed when related to others, as all pairs are inevitably linked. When one examines the male and female pair on its own, one will immediately nurture the idea of gender roles, but where these gender roles comes from is unclear. We tend to see the female as fragile, emotional, and the protector of children whereas the male is strong, powerful, and the ruler of the house [online 5]. Though in today’s rapidly changing society, gender roles are not as prominent as they once were, these words are still associated. A common binary opposition
used by feminists to support their case is that of rational and emotional [online 3]. In our society it is seen as a benefit to be rational and a disadvantage to be overly emotional. Because men are seen to be rational whereas women emotional, the former are often placed at a higher position in the hierarchy of our society. This is just one example of how binary opposites can be linked, and the meaning of one pair can deeply affect the other.

Now one may ask where do these binary opposites come from, and why this has created the hierarchy we today call society. A philosopher who concerned himself with the issues of binary opposites was Ferdinand de Saussure. According to Saussure, binary oppositions can be defined as “the means by which units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what it is not.” [onlne1]. Saussure was a structuralist, whereas Derrida was a member of the post-structuralism school of thought, and this is why their ideas differ on the idea of binary opposition. For Saussure, binary oppositions occur naturally in the human mind, and these binary oppositions are constantly changing [online 2]. An example of this brings us back to the binary opposition of black and white. When we are younger, these were just colors. But, as one grows up, and gains knowledge these words gain ulterior meanings, and begin to symbolize other things, such as evil and good, or the hero and the villain [online 2]. Saussure’s view on binary opposition is the one most recognized, and easiest to understand.

Jacques Derrida discusses the idea of binary oppositions to great lengths. He does not accept the idea however; instead he completely rejects it [online 3]. Derrida argues that these oppositions are subjective and constantly changing, therefore they will eventually overlap and begin to contradict one another. This is the essence of what Derrida called deconstruction.[online 4] So what is deconstruction? In the words of Derrida himself, “What deconstruction is not? Everything of course! What is deconstruction? Nothing of course!” [online 4]. Basically Derrida is saying that words do not have actual meanings, they just relate to other words, and the mind creates meanings for these words, they do not actually exist. Derrida does however acknowledge the human tendency to think in opposites, but instead of the opposite of black being white; to him it is not-black. Derrida comes up with another term, différance¹, to explain this theory [online 4]. He is trying to prove that the

¹ One will notice that the word difference is pronounced the same as difference in the French language, not a mistake on Derrida’s behalf.
meanings of words are not in the words themselves, but in the differences between them. If we go back to the actual word “différence”, and Derrida’s intention for this to sound the same as “difference” in the French language, we will see that this was meant as an example of how with the verbal language there is always a slippage of meaning, whereas in the written language this does not exist so much [online 4].

Binary oppositions are part of human nature, and whether one uses Derrida’s interpretation or Saussure’s, the issues are still the same. The connotative meaning of words is always different from the denotative, and as Derrida mentioned, the spoken is never the same as the written. There are many binary oppositions in our world, and these create the hierarchy of our society. We attempt to break this hierarchy by placing all things equal, and on the surface they may appear to be so, but the power of language is more than we can imagine. Words can change the implications of any other words, and once we apply the greatest machines on earth, our brains, to these words, interpretations and connotations will vary from every brain. Difference, Pairs, and Deconstruction are all valid theories, and in part we use all three in language, spoken and written.

Bibliography:


