

COMMUNICATING ART EDUCATION: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TURKISH DRAMA SCHOOLS 'ONLINE COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The history of Turkish theater reflects many aspects of Turkish modernization. Since the Tanzimat Reform Era in the 1830's, a shift from traditional to Westernized way of writing, acting and staging together with its social and cultural environment has been encouraged by the Empire. This modernist approach continued in the Republic and it gained a momentum in the 1920's. However, it was only in the 1940's when the first Conservatory teaching modern drama in academy was founded. Until then, theater education had not been institutionalized in a Western way; rather, the knowledge of this field of art used to be transmitted through master-apprentice relationships within long-established independent companies. After the launch of the first Conservatory in Ankara, some others in Istanbul, İzmir and Eskişehir, many Turkish actors have been trained for decades at such modern drama schools formed by prestigious state universities. The advent of foundation universities in the 1990's challenged a relatively stable student market and more and more Conservatories-or theater schools in Fine Arts Faculties- have started to attain a place in the market. As of 2021, there are 15 drama schools in 2 state and 13 foundations in foundation universities in Istanbul. This proliferation of Conservatories led to the necessity of communicating with prospective students, stakeholders and art community in order to distinguish their strengths, how they differ from others, and their unique promises. This study focuses on the way these schools communicate online through their official websites. A discourse analysis is used to understand their approach, worldview, values and communication styles. It shows that educational goals are described through an idealized theater person with multi-skills, rhetorical structure is mainly based on logos and ethos elements; and opposite concepts are used in order to emphasize their differentiation points.

Keywords: Conservatory, drama school, communication, marketing, discourse analysis

ÖZET

Türk tiyatrosunun gelişimi, modernleşme tarihinden birçok iz taşımaktadır. 1830'lardaki Tanzimat Dönemi'nden itibaren İmparatorluk, Batı tarzı dramatik yazarlık, oyunculuk ve sahnelemeyi kültürel ve sosyal çevresiyle teşvik etmişse aynı motivasyon Cumhuriyet döneminde daha da büyük bir ivmeyle devam etmiştir. Ne var ki, akademi çatısı altında modern drama eğitimi veren üniversite bölümlerinin kurulması, 1940'ları bulmuştur. Bu zamana kadar tiyatro sanatının icracıları, sanatlarının hünelerini kurumsallaşmış Batı modelindeki okullar yerine ağırlıklı olarak usta-çırak ilişkileriyle aktarmıştır.

Önce Ankara, devamındaysa İstanbul ve Eskişehir gibi illerde açılan konservatuvarlarla, drama eğitimi farklı bir boyut kazanmıştır. 1990'lerde vakıf üniversitelerinin açtığı bölümlerle görece ağır ilerleyen süreç hareketlenmiş, 2021 yılına geldiğimizdeyse sadece İstanbul'da 13 vakıf ve 2 devlet üniversitesinde bulunan tiyatro bölümleriyle yoğun bir rekabet ortamı şekillenmiştir. Bu ortamda öğrenci adayları ve her türlü paydaşla kurulan iletişimin niteliği önem kazanmıştır. Güçlü yanları, farklılaşma noktaları ve özgün taraflarını farklı mecralarda anlatma ihtiyacı artan okulların internet sitelerinde kendilerini nasıl tanıttıkları da ayrıca dikkat çekmeye başlamıştır. Bu çalışmada, İstanbul'daki tiyatro bölümlerinin internet sayfaları incelenmiştir. Dünya görüşlerini, eğitim hedeflerini, değerlerini ve iletişim tarzlarını ortaya koymak amacıyla bir söylem analizi yapılmıştır. Buna göre okulların ideal tiyatro insanı kurgulayarak çok boyutluluğu işlediği, retorik yapılarını ağırlıklı olarak logos ve etos üzerine inşa ettiği ve zıt kavramlar üzerinden farklılaşma noktalarını vurguladıkları sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pazarlama, Konservatuvar, İletişim, Söylem Analizi

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Kant, art plays a crucial role in improving the communication among social actors in a society by constantly nourishing intellectual universe (as cited in Guyer, 2006). As one of the most important performing arts, theater meets people, ideas, techniques, and theoretical and practical knowledge and contributes to this process of communication in a unique way. It combines various components such as text, actor, scene, audio-visual elements, and public, hence is a collaborative creation (Dowell & Weitkamp, 2021). Although the end product of this process is the visible part on the stage, the transfer of knowledge via education is also a latent part of it. The art of acting, staging, directing, writing, producing is shaped through a learning process between the novice and experienced. Despite different paths taken along the journey of institutionalizing the theater education in different countries, modern drama schools opened by universities are one of the most essential venues where this relationship takes place in today's world. Thanks to improving global opportunities, a growing number of theater enthusiasts' study in and outside their countries at such schools to obtain a BA degree in fine arts through drama with hopes of following global carriers.

In this competitive global environment, Turkey displays a growing potential for drama students due to mounting number of private theater companies and new performance centers (Çobanoğlu & Çavdar, 2018), also new opportunities social media present to actors as influencers and especially Turkish series gaining national and global popularity (Uştuk, 2019). In fact, the perception of acting changed dramatically from negative to positive over decades, not just in Turkey but around the globe, actors gained higher prestige in society (Rowbotham, 2020) as did drama schools. Therefore, universities responded to the growing demand in student market by opening schools under conservatories or performing arts departments. This quick response ability coincides with the fact that the number of foundation universities in Turkey has exponentially increased in the last 25 years (Akçığıt & Özcan-Tok, 2020) and they compete for a larger market share. Contrary to the state universities, foundation universities budget marketing activities highly, improve their academic and technical facilities and invest more to progressive projects in order to attract more students.

There are 15 universities in Istanbul (www.osym.gov.tr) -13 foundation and only 2 state- that offer a BA degree either through Conservatories or Theater departments at Fine Arts Faculties. They actively use online communication channels in order to get into contact with prospective students and improve their brand image in addition to offline marketing activities which especially draw attention during students' university preference period in summer. However, websites offer permanent official information whenever students need. Therefore, universities neatly work on creating user-friendly, informative, self-explanatory and attention-grabbing pages.

In this regard, the quality of communication maintained online deserves a closer look since they reflect these schools' educational, artistic and technical approaches as well as a worldview, culture, motivations, and set of values which shape their priorities. In this regard, their websites, including managerial messages, vision and mission statements and description of their education, present remarkable qualitative data to comprehend their realities, the way they perceive and teach performing arts in relation with market dynamics, stakeholders in society and technology. Thus, this study follows a discourse analysis of official online content of Istanbul-based drama schools at the undergraduate level and provides insight about the form and content of their online communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

From the ancient Greece to modern Europe, teaching drama has developed in close relation with rhetorics to be used in politics, elocution in civic affairs and Church in order to diffuse religious knowledge through preaching and performing Bible scenes (Bolton, 2007). This means that despite a vast literature and tradition of doing theater for centuries, the institutionalization of its education was strictly dependent on the context. It was shaped according to the need of that specific case such as defending an idea in an agora, demanding rights in a court or calling for religious duties. In other words, some technical acting skills serving to such situations were extracted from drama as a whole with its literature, theory and approaches. Other than that, acting in a broader sense used to be taught in companies from generation to generation without systematized training (Ross, 2012). The modern idea of teaching drama independently and for the sake of art would only arise in the first half of the 19th century in England and in the States (Burwick, 2015). Towards the 20th century, royal academies and private schools found by entrepreneur actors have proliferated, then universities began offering BFA programs as well as Conservatories teaching drama with music and dance; finally in the 60's universities started offering acting programs as MFA at higher education (Zazzali, 2022). Thus, the tradition of learning drama by doing and becoming experienced with the help of masters over a period of time evolved into a more institutionalized academic version of teaching; and got organized upon the needs of a modern actor living in a modern society (Ross, 2012). In other words, academic theater education in today's sense does not date back a long time much as it is one of the oldest professions in the world history.

The development of Turkish theater education has also similarities with its journey in Western countries. Beyond the folk theater as an essential part of the Anatolian culture, a unique version which mixes Western repertoires and staging styles with traditional way of acting based on improvisation and in interaction with the audience called "Tuluât" emerged in the 19th century (And, 2014). No doubt, the Westernization climate in the late- Empire due to the Tanzimat Reform Era led this shift in actors' performances as well as the content and form of staging. Afterwards, the Palace encouraged private campaigns such as Odeon Theater, French Theater, Istanbul Operetta Society, Benliyan Operetta Company, Gedikpaşa and Naum Theater formed by different ethnicities mainly in Istanbul (Büyükarman, 2019). Although Darulbedayi was opened and funded by the state in 1914, it could only get institutionalized in 1927 after the arrival of Muhsin Ertuğrul, a pioneer of modern Turkish theater (Nutku, 1999). After this point, the rapid increase in the quantity and quality in the field of theater, including companies, schools, performance centers and networks reflect the importance attached to theater by the Republic as an instrument of modernization (Buttanrı, 2006& And, 2014). Together with Village Institutes, Community Centers, State Theaters, and periodicals focused on theater, the first conservatory was opened at Darulbedayi in 1927 (Yiğit, 2017). This, however, was not offering a university degree despite its prestige in art communities. It was only in 1936 when a State Conservatory was formed as an undergraduate school.

Although its real integration with BA degree-offering institutions happened in the 80's with the launch of Hacettepe University, this and others including Istanbul, Dokuz Eylül and Ankara DTCF presented many artists in Turkish theater and played a key role in the blossoming artistic life in Turkey (Şener, 1999). In addition to other state conservatories such as Mimar Sinan, Atatürk and Anadolu, Bilkent University opened a drama school as the first foundation university of Turkey in 1996. This encouraged others to enter this market which was becoming more and more popular thanks to booming cultural scenery and media looking for new artists and productions.

With the advent of foundation universities especially in the 2000's, the communication strategies of higher education entities changed dramatically. Their relatively more decentralized bureaucratic structures, investment capacity on technology, student-centered approach, close relationships with industries and strong international ties (Erguvan, 2013) created a brand new competitive environment in student enrollment process in Turkey. In fact, this accords with the idea that universities function as any other entity in service sector by working hard to create a sustainable brand image and reputation management (Brookes, 2003). As Mintzberg (1996) states, university students are not just the subjects of a long education process or citizens using their civic rights but at the same time clients before choosing which one to go and customers right after getting enrolled and during which their satisfaction matters. This increases the necessity of showing differentiation points, level of experience and ability of responding to varying student needs in a rapidly transforming global market (Bennet, Ali-Chouldry, 2003 & Chapleo, 2010). Rising marketing budgets are inevitable. Yet, marketing a university as one of the most significant instruments of education is still a controversial issue. Here, the idea of revealing marketing activities as selling any other mass consumption product and its opposite which takes them as an opportunity to build an efficient and truthful communication conflict (Cutlip, 1970 & Pelletier, 1985 & Litten, 1980 & Jevons, 2006).

Universities offering drama schools in Turkey experience this challenge as well. While the competitive environment pushes them to use marketing tools efficiently, the perception of art and education presents a difficulty in managing marketing goals and delicate public perception. Here, the target audience, messages emphasized, channels used, and brand strategy have particular importance. As one of the mostly used channels where schools and prospect students or other enthusiasts meet, official websites do not only offer formal information but also an idea about the school's vision, brand identity and self-positioning.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

As it is discussed above, the last 100 years witnessed the evolution of drama schools in Turkey similarly to their substitutes in the world. Each chapter with particular challenges, novelties and characteristics served to the present institutionalization and systematization of these schools as internationally valid and competitive undergraduate entities capable to compete with others. This journey from scarcity to abundance both in quantity and quality makes it worthy to fully understand university drama schools 'motivations and eagerness to respond to external forces as well as specific mindsets which construct the core identity of these brands.

With this in mind, this study analyses the content of 15 official websites of undergrad-level drama schools in Istanbul. The data is collected from "About Us" sections of their online pages. It is aimed to understand their educational goals and priorities, meanings attributed to the learning process as well as the significance attached to the theory and practice of theater in relation with the performing arts industry. Thus, it is a qualitative study in accordance with Merriam (2009)'s definition that meanings attributed to experiences, talks produced through the lens of a dominant worldview and interpretations of categories matter in this kind of studies. Moreover, the languages used in any kind of documents cannot be taken without its social, political and economic context and the belief system of those who produce them (Fairclough, Wodak & 1997).

Therefore, it is inevitable to apply a discourse analysis after categorizing the commonalities and differences in these texts.

4. FINDINGS

Documents present meaningful data about these schools' goals, motivations, identities and taken-for-granted worldviews. As a sum of short histories, mission and vision statements and statements which define the environment surrounding future actors, texts involve 3 categories from a critical regard: educational goals, construction of marketing rhetorics and mediated opposite concepts.

4.1 EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Most of the universities analyzed in this work describe an ideal theater person in order to explain educational goals. This person is not just a pure talent but is also multi-skilled, equipped with physical and intellectual assets, has a strong theoretical background as well as a practical turn of mind, as innovative so conservative, and holds qualities such as being an inspirer, passionate, highly-disciplined and adaptive. Actually, this person is a hero who fights against the caprices of society, technology, and industry, briefly the uncertainties of the world, like a warrior.

While one foundation university depicts this theater person as someone who "shapes future theater by using their critical thinking ability and transform the society they live in", another one stresses the "necessity of fulfilling the needs of a constantly changing, transforming and developing world in the 21st century". In fact, being "innovative" is emphasized by most of the foundation universities examined. However, while some of them depict this innovative theater person as someone who also "transforms the society as a social actor", "determines what is about happening", and "become visionary leaders", some of them only emphasize the ability to adapt to "changing social norms, expectations and professional techniques". In this sense, one university proudly argues that they are able to "daringly provoke the imagination and mental energy" and they encourage students to become innovative.

Another feature of this ideal theater person is having a strong intellectual background which helps the actor to develop a "socio-political identity" as well as a knowledge of the "delicacies of the profession". Here, "interdisciplinary" deserves a closer look since almost all foundation universities stress its significance. They do not see theater person as a sole technician mastering acting skills on scene but also someone who can relate professional knowledge with other social sciences such as history, sociology and psychology. This improves the ability of "understanding the world we live in, social relationships we go through". Some of them praise this ability from an employment point of view. They state that "the more interdisciplinary the education is, the more comprehensive work opportunities are". Actually, the curriculum is commonly presented as a magic formula which combines technical, practical and theoretical knowledge. It is depicted as the weapon of this hero theater person starting to fight after finishing the university.

Another common characteristic of this ideal drama education is the sense of social responsibility. While some of them only emphasize the skills to be used in a promising career, a considering number of universities put forward the ability of serving to the society, contributing to the local and global drama communities. Therefore, expressions such as "being first a human", "transforming the social structure", "able to self-criticize", "ethically aware" are common.

Despite the changing stress on intellectuality as a personal aspect and social awareness, employment capacity is commonly argued by all foundation universities. They see their students as future actors "to be employed in high-quality productions", "who "satisfy rising sectoral needs", some universities assertively attribute the role of "producing his/her own theater, movies, art centers", and being "not content with the opportunities given but also realizing their own projects". Moreover, they present their students as "fully-equipped theater people who are able to follow their own paths". However, there is an opposite talk as well.

Rather than identifying students with theater heroes fighting against all restrictions and actively create a career and transform the society, this one talks about a more passive student profile. To illustrate, citations such as “fulfilling sectoral needs”, “no difficulty in being employed by the industry”, or “able to find a job in a different field if not in a theater” show that these few foundation universities have less assertive educational goals.

4.2. MARKETING RHETORICS

Texts analyzed present different formulations of persuasive talk in the light of Aristo’s rhetorical tools (2016). The significance of logos, -the analytical aspect-, pathos which represents the emotions and ethos as the credibility of the source aspect vary in different websites. First of all, it is noteworthy that ethos is mostly used by state universities and those foundation drama schools which have a longer history compared to the others. State universities offer a long history of the evolution of Conservatories in Turkey, and they also list the names of the artists who have studied and then taught in their universities. Interestingly, they do not argue their educational goals nor their employment promises. Ethos is the only rhetorical aspect they use while constructing the language of their websites. Foundation ones, however, mention their relatively older establishment date, using phrases such as “since 2006”, “serves since the academic year of 1996-1997”, “started in 2001-2002”. It can easily be observed that those who do not date back long as such, use other rhetorical tools more aggressively. In addition to histories, references are also made to increase the effect of ethos. Beside directly mentioning names, -“As our dear teacher Müşfik Kenter used to say before his death”,- “founded by milestone names such as Ahmed Levendoğlu, Zeliha Berksoy”-, they use videos and pictures of their well-known teachers. One of them shows students surrounding the famous actor Metin Akpınar like many others using shots of their celebrity teachers. Furthermore, international ties are also highlighted in order to increase the credibility. Especially, special agreements with highly acknowledged foreign schools are mentioned separately unlike Erasmus+ opportunities which can be found on the links on the page. For example, one school starts a paragraph with “special collaboration with one of the mostly known drama schools in the world, Michael Chekhov Europe Training” and completes it by mentioning the privileges this relationship offers, such as certificates, trainings with special names and validity in Europe. Another one explains their international goals in detail and uses the label of their “BAU Global” brand. In this way, schools position themselves as more trustworthy, ambitious and widely acclaimed institutions. While emphasis on internationality also serves to logos by proving educational goals, academic staff quality is commonly used to strengthen logical arguments. The promise of employment and preparing to industrial environment is mostly kept realizable by stressing the hands-on background and approach of teachers. While some of them are more attentive with keeping this practical aspect balanced to theoretical one, some use a more challenging tone and highlight teachers’ guidance. For example, one foundation university promise a mentorship program between students and teachers which continues even after the graduation. Another one puts forward teachers experienced not only in theater but also in cinema, TV and voice-overs. Logos is also strengthened by offering hands-on study as well. Here, instead of teacher’s professional experience and network, it is the student already taking the school’s stage, (“our students enhance themselves in our own performance center”), enjoying school’s private a cast agency (“our students professionally take the stage since their first year and then benefit from the cast agency which meets them with TV producers”), and “taking part in organizations arranged by the university as well as in national and international festivals”. While few universities emphasize their eagerness on the use of technology, not just as physical capacity in the classrooms but also as an instrument to be used in any artist’s career, most of them praise their interdisciplinary approach. The flexibility in elective courses with other disciplines is widely emphasized. Some of them even name the departments that students can make minor studies with.

Together with hands-on study, internationality and multi-disciplinary education environment, eligibility of alternative careers are mentioned to increase employability argument. Their students can “also follow an academic career thanks to the intellectual background provided”, “become TV presenters”, “be competent to work at publicity agencies and dubbing studios as well in addition to State Theater, City Theater and cinema”, “teach at high-schools”, “be a part of any process of show-business”.

Pathos is the least used rhetorical tool in these documents. Except some universities stressing the learning process of future “inspirational artists” or defining theater as a “call for a better world and humanity” and describing the highly skilled ideal theater person mentioned above, emotions are rarely used.

4.3. MEDIATED OPPOSITE CONCEPTS

Schools describe themselves by using opposite concepts, claiming that they are capable of combining contrasts such as global vs. local, theory vs. practice, conservative vs. innovative, idealism vs. pragmatism. It is the ability of finding the synthesis between opposing ideas, concepts, approaches and techniques that they proudly mention.

First of all, mixing internationality with localness is widely used. One of them argues that the approach based on “global production” and “cultural accumulation of Anatolia” nourishes students as multi-cultural people. Another one sets the goal of “raising students who will represent us both in Turkey and in foreign countries as well”. Furthermore, “interactions with international art communities” is mentioned to assure that their students are always “aware of local and global artistic expansions”. While another university enthusiastically promises “international artistic and educational standards”, it also emphasizes the importance of an actor who “internalizes national essence and culture”. Similarly, another school praises their curriculum since it provides “skills responding to both domestic and international markets”.

The relationship between theory and practice is another contrast mediated in the texts. Intellectual background, theoretical frame and knowledge, interdisciplinary approach and cultural assets are stressed. In return, hands-on approach for the academic staff and students is highly spoken as exemplified above. Furthermore, the ability of mixing old school approaches with more innovative and transforming applications is glorified, too. For example, arguments like “synthesizing contemporary art and aesthetic approaches and taking the long-established tradition”, “teaching present performing culture and tendencies as well as old ones” and “providing a perspective of today’s needs and expectations without moving away from a conservative structure” show that traditional and modern do not mean much alone, they are valuable if only they exist together. Likewise, idealism and pragmatism commonly coexist in the same text. While the ideal theater person depicted above, together with high ideals of theater, its history, literature and social context, is eagerly glorified, a pragmatic frame in terms of employability and sector-orientedness is also provided. Thus, phrases mentioning “students are equipped with academic knowledge as well as practicing with famous artists”, “internship opportunities to gain experience before the graduation”, “providing the necessary basis to work at companies such as TRT, state theaters, city theater, commercials, studios” are common.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of modern drama education in Turkey has witnessed several challenges, such as lack of human resource, students, theater entities offering work opportunities, performing centers and literary works, as well as unsatisfactory curriculum and managerial perspective of schools; as argued by prominent figures of Turkish theater and literature such as Reşat Nuri Güntekin and Muhsin Ertuğrul in different decades (Göktaş, 1996). It is noteworthy that texts analyzed in this study respond to such concerns of early stages of Turkish drama education.

irst of all, they explain the significance of various aspects such as multi-dimensional curriculum, practice, interdisciplinarity, internationality, cultural and human resource, in theater education. These are used as marketing promises as if the target audience's main question were "how will I get successful after graduation?". In this sense, employability is prioritized as a rhetorical argument around which is based on logos providing practical examples, epitomes, numbers, rational arguments. Together with career opportunities, ideal theater person is eagerly depicted as well. In fact, this has a redeeming role in turning the business-oriented talk to an artistically more refined one. Except 3 foundation universities which only mention their future alumni's market value, this idealization is another indispensable argument which also addresses to emotions. Still, pathos is not strongly used as a rhetorical tool while short histories, references, exclusive international agreements and celebrities are used to strengthen ethos. Moreover, using binary oppositions in the same argument is also frequently performed and presented as something which increases their faculty of training students. The more the school is able to bring together opposing concepts, the more assertive the tone becomes. Thus, internationality is accentuated with local awareness, practice with theory, innovation with status-quo, and idealism with pragmatism. Moreover, the emphasis on the cultural context corroborates the idea of Zazzali (2022) that there is not one uniform and universal way of teaching drama. Universities are mostly keen on expressing the importance they attach to nationality and awareness of local cultures. Finally, it is remarkable that state universities mostly rely on their histories rather than offering services which help to launch international careers. Contrary to foundation universities which make use of these websites to inform the audience about their differentiation points, exclusive features, educational goals and approaches, state universities are not expressive online.

It is apparent that drama school's online expressions are a reflection of the conflict between artistic ideals and demands of market economy. The more consistent and balanced messages are built, the more persuasive the talk becomes. Although Turkish vocational drama schools in universities have come a long way since the early days full of concerns, the new challenge will likely be their communication with the forthcoming generation whose media consumption customs, language and values change day by day.

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