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Beyond Words. Problem of Silence

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Abstract

This study completes some of the theses formulated in another paper which, however, dealt with the issue of inauthenticity of communication in the current public space (Ciulei, 2013). In that paper, we asserted that what today is being expressed in the public space is the expression of our inability to reclaim our idiom and language from the area of authentic knowledge, of alethic assertions. Consequently, public space becomes a space of palaver, of everyday chatter, therefore, in the absence of well-defined value and epistemological rules, we risk becoming the witnesses of a new *Tower of Babel*.

What we are trying to argue, this time, is that the other boundary of public communication is *silence*. And that is why our effort is, above all, methodological and paradigmatic. Thus we shall try to define the boundaries between which communication in public space should occur. Between pointless and inauthentic chitchat and silence bearing meanings and significations. Between an epistemological lack and a cognitive and emotional excess, impossible to express, though. Each of the two boundaries, according to public communication reading, is useless. Placing public communication between these two limits makes it a *normal* one.

1. Introduction

In an extreme case, one may say anything about silence. (Le Breton, 2001: 22) That it is horrible, but sublime, as well, that it can express so many and nothing at the same time, that it can be both the sign of ignorance and that of total knowledge, that it relates to stupidity and brilliance also, that it expresses all possible emotions, from indifference to interest. One may say that silence can often express more than words do or, on the contrary, that all

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that silence has more than words would be (only) the superiority and easiness of using it. Traditional culture conveys the very idea of silence being above words in aphorisms such as: *A still tongue makes a wise head*, *It is better to say nothing and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt* or *Silence is golden.*

But, in a world of communication, word prevails over silence and public space is and should remain of the word. Silence is, in this context, considered as non-participation while word is plunged into the unknown. In an ontology of the inauthentic, Silence is nothing, word is everything. Ultimately, silence is just a pause between words. However, in a world of truth and authenticity, silence becomes and is … something else. This epistemic superiority of silence is, nevertheless, confirmed so long as public communication makes no effort to rest in the truth, at least by complying with certain minimum epistemological and logical criteria: coherence, consistency and foundation.

Sometimes we seem to be willing to choose between the anachronic silence and the incessant ado of the homo communicans. But, both silence and sound are relational concepts, defined as social, cultural, gender and age practices. In fact, communication does not exist without the space of silence that allows reflection. Besides, "silence pre-exists and lasts in the sea of conversations" (Le Breton, 2001: 23-24), is "a feeling, a modality of meaning, not a measure of ambient sonority. It refers to man's attitude towards social environment" (Le Breton, 2001: 23-24). There are systems of silence, different with each culture, according to which one is considered as being talkative or silent. There are various policies, disciplines and manifestations of silence. Silence creates ambiguities. Controlling it means controlling interaction with others or self-control and can be used as an instrument of repression or rejection and opposition.

Without realising, we abide by laws of silence in our most common conversations, we move about in institutions of silence (libraries, places of worship, theatres and concert halls), we use it as introspection or feel it as anguishing and cover it with noises, we perceive the muteness of the world and even sell it as an endangered value (just observe carefully the advertisements for cars, appliances, engines of all sorts, which are, by all means, silent, soundproofing in offices, vacation packages far from the noisy world, etc.).

Silence groups meanings of religions and quests of mystics. It is, at the same time, the beneficial space of concentration, quest, recovery and man's helplessness in the face of pain, death, absence, the impossibility of making a sense. It must be cultivated or exorcised, continually adjusted to our measure, for "silence always has the last word" (Le Breton, 2001: 67).

2. Silence and the beginning of knowledge

We have previously stated that the world of the (in) authentic, of the diachronic lies under the sign of semiotics, while the world of truth lies under the sign of silence and semantics. But we are setting out believing that: "talking about silence is, probably, a paradox (…); speaking silence may be a very different thing. Therefore, doesn't pointless talk turn speech into a bleeding of silence?" (Ulieru, 2012: 318) And yet, this distinction we propose has no alethic dimension. It does not decide which of the two dimensions is preferable. It is only a delimitation of public communication space, an attempt towards a taxonomy of communication and (un)communication, meant precisely to separate the latter from (non)communication that we understand as being an ontological refusal of participation.

The beginning also lies under the sign of silence. This is proved by the rituals of almost every initiation cult. For what else can we imagine the neophyte doing in the reflection room? He quietly looks around and tries to perceive the meanings of drawings he watches. He knows that he cannot make them out and keeps silent. He understands the "true knowledge involves the acknowledgment of not knowing". (the Areopagite, 1993: 12) And it is not easy for him for the ordinary man, the profane, cannot bear four states: silence, darkness, stillness and solitude, and when circumstances bring him into one of these situations, he feels constrained (Beresniak, 2009: 174-176). This feeling of fear is induced by the inability of utterance. An inability which is socially, not physiologically, felt, that is why what we shall first of all cultivate in us is mastering this fear. In certain rituals of initiation, the neophyte, the silent, is pressed on with a knife above his heart, a spot that acupuncture specialists call "point of anxiety". (Mâşu, 2009: 233-234) At this point of our argumentation, we cannot but grasp the emerged paradox: communication, though circumstantial in the order of the world it reveals, is characterised by comfort, and the assumed silence, authentic at least in the order of emotions, is uncomfortable and becomes, naturally (not) preferable. It is paradoxical how entering the inauthentic and claiming from the (non)truth is a human dimension of ours that we cannot elude as much as we would want to. It is, in our opinion, the ontological foundation of public space communication.

This is a place which is common to almost all mysteries: he who renounces the private space of his life and enters, at some point, the public space of communication passes through, above all, a Stage of Silence, during which he listens, observes and learns to refrain from speaking. One of the great rules of old initiation orders, of old mysteries or even of certain Far East mystical Buddhist schools was that, for at least one year, disciples should keep absolute silence. He does not live the Silence, but carries Silence. His presence in this public space makes Silence positive, meaning that this neophyte's presence in the public space should be a call to moderation in the use of words. The road to wisdom is crossed in silence and starts with silence, biblical texts proclaim as well. Through silence, the meaning of words is revealed (Delbos, 2001: 14), for his silence is not dumb but active: from sign towards meanings. It is an assumed and intellectualised silence. This silence will allow his setting out on the long journey of know thyself. He becomes a part of a semantic triad: hear-listen-understand. He disciplines himself intellectually for "ideas ripen through meditation, quietly and in silence, which is a conversation with oneself" (Wirth, 2005: 145), and it is good that it happens this way because "meaningful opinions result from intimate debates, which engage in the secrecy of thought. That wise man thinks a lot and speaks a little" (Wirth, 2005: 146).

Actually, this silence expressed in public space is a symbol in itself and, therefore, a carrier of truth. It is a first symbol which is offered for us to interpret, understand and apprehend. It is the only beginning of the long way to wisdom. As Dionysius the Areopagite states: "The higher we go, the more concentrated in the intelligible are the reasons of what has been seen. Therefore and now, penetrating into the darkness beyond reason, we shall reach not a short speech but non-speech and total failure to understand." (1993: 26)

Secret is the uterine brother of Silence, according to Joël Jacques (2007: 41). And in the vicinity of the symbol, word meets the thought halfway articulating it. In this articulation sense is lost and meanings emerge. Only thoughts with special power break the weakness of word and come to the other's understanding. It is difficult to reach the origin of thought starting from the word. Sometimes, even word, notion, has a dimension which can be known and one which is meant to remain a mystery. It is such a vision of the paradisiacal knowledge-Luciferian knowledge relation that Lucian Blaga's epistemology attempts. Though it resembles the Kantian noumenon, the incognoscibility that Blaga speaks about is rather mystical than gnoseological. Kant delimited our abilities to know so long as the boundaries of our knowledge were the ontological boundaries of our reason. Without actually stating that what remains to be known is also authentic, the German philosopher emphasised that, nevertheless, the noumenon is that which establishes in existential order what we know at the level of the phenomenon. In other words, all our knowledge, expressed and expressible, is in fact based on something inexpressible and incognoscible. There is a mystery-silence in the origin of thought. This mystery has, however, two dimensions: the first refers to the mystery part that can be intuited but not verbalised, the second, more profound, refers to the total mystery, the mystery which can be neither intuited nor verbalised. With the first part, we could say that only the mystery-silence exists, that it is a side of the being, without being able to delimit it. The second part is the being of mystery, the being of silence itself. The first makes the symbolic work possible. The second establishes it in ontological order. The first, expressed in symbols, refers to truth. And this truth refers to existence. The authentic and which cannot be expressed! As Dionysius the Areopagite states: "The most divine and highest of things seen and understood are only symbols." (1993: 23) The initial silence, which emerges by using one single word. The first, the only, the unique. A perfect creation needed only one word. Several would have placed it in the order of maybe. Creation could not be, it had to be. The uniqueness of the starting word makes one think about the absence of all others.

Consequently, in an apophatic way, truth and the authentic hide behind the (un)expressed, with words throwing it into diachrony. Truth lies "far ahead denials and above them, being beyond any denial and affirmation." (the Areopagite, 1993: ch. I, 2)

3. Silence and the public space

The title of this subchapter is at least paradoxical. For it is impossible to speak, in the era of communicativity (not of communication) about silence, and where?! In the public space. However, it may be considered paradoxical if we accept as true and valid all those distinctions and taxonomies we have got used to: public space – private space, communication – silence, language – idiom, and so on. But, if we accept that all these are either methodological or epistemological conventions, we shall make room for silence, as well, in the act of speech, so long as we do not

consider the latter as a continuous and rapid sonorous flux. So what is speech then? The answer may come from a Saussurean perspective in which language is an object, formed similarly to a code while speech is the activation of this code by individual subjects. As a result, language is pure passiveness, manifesting like a thesaurus made of signs which is organised by speech, in discursive practices. This organisation of the meaning of words is not exhaustive, because the meaning of sentence, of composition is completely different from constituent meanings. The meaning derived is individual and personal, is contextual. The meaning derived is called by Guillaume (1964) *discourse* and clarifies the distinction he makes between *meaning* and *meaning effect*. In language, each word has only one corresponding meaning, instead it may have numerous meaning effects when used in sentences and clauses during discourse formation.

Here lies the epistemological stake we refer to: epistemologically, very likely as a term, a notion to denote an authentic and true reality. Once part of the discourse, the term invokes another reality, a conjunct one, a circumstantially created discursive reality.

Discourse is not an ill-founded creation, though, on the contrary, considering that thinking expresses itself in language through sentences and clauses. Moreover, in the 17th and 18th centuries, in Europe, language was regarded to be, in fact, a representation of thinking, even a *faithful picture* of it. This theory contradicted the Cartesian theory of ideas considered to be beyond time and perceived, sometimes, through a special intuition. The theory according to which language is the expression of thinking places the act of thinking, and, invariably, language, *in time*. Both thinking and language are dependent on time, preserving the signs of their time. To think a concept means, in fact, to build it. This construction is not achieved *in illo tempore* but in a real, definite, operative time. Words, viewed as signified by power, represent thinking only if they are organised in systems and each system represents the operative time involved in the thinking of a notion. Each word of the system is a unidirectional exercise, in the sense that using a word in particular in a discourse marks a point, a cut-out of a reality. It is these discursive cut-outs that constitute the basis of the meaning of words. This translation for another of the inner thought results, among other changes, in the transition from intuition to discourse, from undefined complexes to precise endeavours. Naturally, losses may occur in the primary meaning, but there are undeniable gains, as well, as regards the aspect of configuration, which materialise through speech or writing and thus form into a visible and analysable object. Therefore, there is a certain state of non-reconciliation between the intrinsic truth of word and the truth in whose construction it helps in the discourse.

In order to support the idea that discourse alienates the word from the reality it signifies, we shall necessarily turn to ancient Greece. One can roughly distinguish three views on language prior to Plato:

1. A (popular) view according to which language is an innate faculty;

2. According to another view, language is arbitrarily constituted. This belief was supported by Democritus on the following grounds: there are words with several meanings, there are objects which have several names and there are many objects that should have their own designation but, in fact, have none ;

3. An opposite thesis to Democritus' view is that of Cratylus, a follower of Heraclitus, which is revealed by Plato in the dialogue with the same name: words store the essences of words, of their nature; whoever knows words, knows things as well. In other words, one's ability to give names to things depends on one's knowing the things. (1978, III, *Cratylos*, 436 c)

All these theories are rejected by Plato who starts from the assumption that thinking is an inner and silent dialogue of the soul with itself. As any artisan has an idea of the thing he must do, so he who gives names must be led by the nature of things which need to be named. (Plato, 1978, III, *Cratylos*, 389 d) Thus, words serve to the analysis of things by their institution itself and describe the ways of being of things. Language is, thus, a natural, not arbitrary institution. Furthermore, language is a consequence of the thinking it clarifies. Word does not exist without knowing the thing that this word names.

Aristotel, without developing a comprehensive theory on this issue, though he embraces the thesis of language conventionality, turns the word, like all the other Greek thinkers, into *a symbol of soul's alterations* just as writing is the representation of voice alteration. (*Despre interpretare*, 1, 16 a.) This *representation* only assigns a meaning to the word: "By name, Aristotel writes, we understand a sound having a meaning by convention, without any reference to time and whose parts, if taken out of the whole, have no meaning." (*Despre interpretare*, 1, 16 a.) The Stagirite confirms his thesis by analysing sophisms which emerge particularly as a result of the ill-use of words, for "one of the reasons [which cause sophisms], the most natural and common reason, has to do with word usage.

Considering that, in a discussion, it is impossible to bring the things themselves, but must use instead the words that symbolise them, we believe that what holds true for words holds true for things, as well, as it happens with calculi in which pebbles are used. But it is not a similar case, for the number of words is finite, like the cluster of ideas, while the number of things is infinite. Therefore, the same idea and the same word must designate several things. Just as, according to the example above, those not used to handling pebbles are deceived by those who know [how to handle them], so it happens in discussions as well. Those who are not aware of the power [of signification] of words get deceived through paralogisms, be it either by discussing with themselves or listening to others" (*Respingerile sofistice*, 1, 165 a)

Besides, Aristotel further completes in the same treatise, his assertion that whoever knows how to distinguish the meanings of a word with precision is very close to the truth. "Indeed, he writes, it is difficult to make out what kind of things are signified by the same word and what kind of things are signified by special words. Whoever knows how to make this distinction is very close to knowing the truth." (*Respingerile sofistice*, 7, 169 a)

For that reason, suspicion of public discourse being inauthentic does not have to do with its lacking epistemic charge, but with its incapacity to express it. Truth does not lie beyond words but in words, beyond their *composition*, though. Consequently, silence appears not as an alternative to discourse but as a co-substantial dimension of it. In silence, word preserves its reference which it loses as soon as it is circumstantiated, for language disguises thinking.

4. Conclusion

What happens in the public space today is not useless, but inauthentic in epistemological order. This does not mean that all public discourse should happen based on some protocol sentences, should claim origins only from verified and corroborated theses or absolute truths, neither can be based only on the circumstantial and the unessential. Public discourse is not and should not always be true or valid (in the logical sense) and neither can elude truth only for the sake of the form. It can be discourse so long as it is grounded.

The boundaries between which public discourse moves and exists are, basically, ontological determinations: its lying, on the one hand, in the immediate, in the inauthentic, in the untruth even, and on the other, in symbol, in the inexpressible truth, the truth lived, transcendentally constituted and, thus, (in)expressible. Public space and public communication really do exist. However, in extreme cases, they can fail in a talk full of inconsistency or in a space of absolute communication which is, however, shrouded in silence. The solution of a functional public discourse would be to place it, at least at a logical-formal level, in the sphere of truth, foundation and validity.

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