

Beyond Communication With the Same: On Sign, Value and Understanding

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Abstract

This paper offers a reflection on the essential characteristics and conditions of communication, hence on what makes communication possible. Reflection on communication inevitably calls for a focus on the production of meaning and understanding, on the problem of interpretation. The primary vocation of communication is the other, therefore dialogic listening and responsiveness by the other for the other, beyond communication with the same, that is, beyond the conventions of official communication and the order of discourse. The paper is developed according to the following main topics: 1. Utterance, text, interpretation; 2. The apparent paradox of communication; 3. The “rustle” of communication: between implicit meaning and explicit meaning; 4. Sense, significance, ambiguity: reading together Welby and Bakhtin; 5. More characteristics of live discourse—silence, listening, responsive understanding.

Keywords: dialogism, interpretant, intertextuality, listening, otherness, responsive understanding, significance, silence, utterance

1. Utterance, Text, Interpretation

Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) thematizes the word in relation to the utterance and the text. His philosophy is a philosophy of the word. But reference here is not to the word viewed in the framework of the system of language, the word understood as the “dead cell” of language, associated to the sentence (Ponzio & Petrilli, 2016). The sentence, the object of linguistics, does not belong to anybody, is not turned to anybody, and is deprived of context, of implied meaning, of intonation. As such the sentence is deprived of sense (see Petrilli, 2016, Chs IV & XI).

Insofar as it is associated to the utterance and to the text, the word is turned to the

other and calls for listening. This is the word of live discourse. Thus understood the word, the live word, that is, the utterance, is always accentuated, intonated, the place of signification inseparable from significance, where meaning and value are recognized in their relation of interconnectivity. In fact, the utterance, the live cell of discourse, a dynamical communicative complex, is endowed with everything the sentence is deprived of. Not least of all, it is endowed with sense. Thus equipped, the utterance is exposed to misunderstanding.

The sentence calls for understanding in terms of recognition and identification. The sentence and understanding-recognition of the repeatable elements of speech (i.e., language) is one thing, the utterance and understanding required by the utterance that produces the unrepeatable sense of the live word is another. In "From Notes Made in 1970-71," Bakhtin (1979, Eng. trans., pp. 132-158) observes that every element of discourse is perceived at two levels: the level of the repeatability of the sentence, the dead cell of language; and the level of the unrepeatability of the utterance, the live cell of the word.

On Bakhtin's account, through the utterance, the live word, language participates in the historical unrepeatability and unfinalised totality of the logosphere (ibid., p. 134). The utterance, sense, responsive understanding (or answering comprehension), sound endowed with sense (the word) are all part of a special logosphere, of a totality that is open and unfinalisable, a structure that is unified and continuous, in becoming (see Bakhtin, 1990).

The notion of the text as elaborated by Bakhtin is no doubt broader than his notion of the sign taken as an isolated unit. Nonetheless, like the sign the text can only flourish and be understood in the light of the broader context: the intertextual context of dialectic/dialogic relationships among texts. The sense of a text develops through its interaction with other texts, along the boundaries of another text. As Bakhtin says: "The dialogic relationships among texts and within the text. The special (not linguistic) nature. Dialogue and dialectics" (1959-1961, in Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105).

This conception of the text implies a theory of language that gives full play to the centrifugal forces of linguistic-cultural life (by contrast to the centripetal forces). In fact, key concepts in such an approach include "otherness," "polysemy," "dialogism," "listening" and "responsiveness," all of which are thematized as constitutive factors of the sign's very identity, consequently of language and of the text which of the material of signs are made (see Petrilli, 2010, pp. 49-85, 137-158, 2012; Ponzio, 1990). Reading Bakhtin the following is another among the many interesting passages we find in his writings for the emphasis it places on dialogism and responsiveness in language and communication: "Being heard as such is already a dialogic relation. The word wants to be heard, understood, responded to, and again to respond to the response, and so forth *ad infinitum*" (1986, p. 127; see also Bakhtin, 1981).

Meaning as articulated through the word, through language, whether verbal or nonverbal, emerges as a signifying pathway, as an interpretive route at once well delineated and yet subject to continuous amplification and variation by virtue of

continuous dialogic contacts with alternate interpretive routes as these emerge and develop among interlocutors in the great sign network (Petrilli, 2012). This explains the indeterminacy, openness, and semantic pliability of signs which, in fact, can only flourish in the context of dialogic relationships, that is, of interconnectedness with the other, the responsive other, the listening other (Petrilli, 2016).

Texts are made of interpretive pathways which always foresee both verbal and nonverbal signs. Consequently, these pathways, interpretive pathways, signifying pathways, know no boundaries in terms of types of signs or of historical-natural languages, all of which can partake in the interpretive process, in one way or another, to varying degrees—the sign knows no systemic boundaries. Each one of us in the interpretive process only ever activates small portions in the overall sign network, no doubt. Indeed, such activation only ever occurs relatively to a given historical-natural language and to a special language within that historical-natural language. All the same, communication, and translation across ever larger pieces of the sign network, is always possible, given that all interpretive routes are necessarily part of the same sign network viewed in its globality, in its totality, in its “detotalized” totality as differences, alterities, relate to each other. And if an interruption is verified at some point in the interpretive process this is only because the interpreter has stopped interpreting.

However, to repeat, we only ever activate small portions in the sign network at any single instant, which is a question of economy no different from the principle of economy that governs all sign systems, including historical-natural languages.

Moreover, the interpretation of a text, whether oral or written, does not necessarily require verbal interpretants, and even less so written interpretants.

By a process of abstraction we can distinguish between two extreme poles in interpretive competence: “identification” on the side of mere “signality” where the interpretive task simply consists in recognizing the sign, thereby involving otherness logic to a minimal degree; and “responsive understanding” where semioticity (or signhood) develops at high degrees of otherness logic, and interpretation is active, creative, innovative, participative, critical and certainly based on involvement with the other, on listening to the other. Only in rare cases is the verbal or written interpretant explicitly an *interpretant of identification*: this is required, for example, in the case of orality when noise levels are so high as to interfere with successful communication; or when a question of the written text, in the face of some form of illegibility because the text is ancient and deteriorated, or because of its specialized language, and so forth. When the need for identification/recognition prevails, interpretive work tends towards the monological, the univocal, fixed and set meaning, that is, towards so-called “signality,” where alterity levels, as anticipated above, are at their lowest; more generally, however, the interpretant is an *interpretant of responsive understanding* which may even be of the nonverbal order, whether in the graphic form (images, graphs, etc.), or bodily (the paraverbal—gestures, intonation, etc).

In a paper of 1959-1961, “The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the

Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis” (it too available in English translation in the 1986 collection of his writings edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*), Bakhtin distinguishes between “two poles” in the text: “language” understood as a “system of signs,” a “language system,” and “utterance”:

The two poles of the text. Each text presupposes a generally understood (that is, conventional within a given collective) system of signs, a language (if only the language of art). If there is no language behind the text, it is not a text, but a natural (not signifying) phenomenon, for example, a complex of natural cries and moans devoid of any linguistic (signifying) repeatability. [...]

And so behind each text stands a language system. Everything in the text that is repeated and reproduced, everything repeatable and reproducible, everything that can be repeated outside a given text (the given) conforms to this language system. But at the same time each text (as an utterance) is individual, unique, and unrepeatable, and herein lies its entire significance (its plan, the purpose for which it was created). [...] (in Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105).

It is possible to proceed toward the first pole, that is, toward language—the language of the author, the language of the genre, the trend, the epoch; toward the national language (linguistics), and, finally, toward a potential language of languages (structuralism, glossematics). It is also possible to proceed toward the second pole—toward the unrepeatable event of the text (ibidem, p. 107).

The text as an utterance is a unique and unrepeatable event. Obviously, just as a fingerprint can be reproduced mechanically (in any number of samples), a text too can be reproduced mechanically as in the case of a reprint. However, “the reproduction of the text by a subject (a return to it, a repeated rereading, a new execution, quotation) is a new, unrepeatable event in the life of the text, a new link in the historical chain of speech communication” (ibidem, p. 106).

2. The Apparent Paradox of Communication

It would seem to be a paradox that in order to communicate we must have already communicated. We cannot communicate if we are not already communicating. This results from what we have said so far. And we need to specify that the type of communication that acts as the foundation of communication is not communication with the same, but communication with the other. Otherness is the basis of communication. Consider that, no doubt, we can always communicate the same things, but the real need of communication is to communicate something new, something that is other, unforeseen, that presents an excess with respect to ordinary communication.

Moreover, verbal communication generally does not originate from itself, it is not

closed in on itself, it does not refer exclusively to itself, it is not self-sufficient. From this point of view, verbal communication refers to the sphere of the nonverbal. In other words, the referents of verbal communication are both verbal and nonverbal. Unfortunately, prejudice apropos the self-sufficiency of verbal communication, prejudice which is rooted in everyday language and dominant common sense knowledge, is such that we are unable to denominate this other type of communication, if not in the negative, that is, as nonverbal communication, precisely, given that another more appropriate specific term is not yet available.

If in oral or written communication we understand that which is uttered or written this is always thanks to interpretant signs that are not exclusively verbal. In other words, the verbal response does not necessarily arise from relationships and sign systems of the linguistic-verbal order alone. As anticipated, what we say is based on preceding verbal and nonverbal communication and occurs in an extended network of signs in which any one given historical-natural language only occupies a very limited space. When we speak to communicate, such an “event” is possible thanks to communication conditions that were established previously. We could even make a claim that seems paradoxical—though paradoxes often help to evidence how things stand: when we speak to communicate communication has already occurred.

This is true in the case of the production of both oral and written texts. Whether written or oral, speech does not install communication relations, but if anything ratifies, maintains, notifies, declares, or exhibits them, furnishing “portmanteau words” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) which enable partners to stay in such relations, to mutually recognize each other, and to express the will to maintain and further develop those relations.

What happens is more or less the same as what happens in the case of a love declaration: unless it is reduced to the status of a conventional act, a pure formality (in which case it is no longer a love relationship), a love declaration is uttered when the love relationship already exists. The implication is that the declaration is only a portmanteau word which anticipates a complementary portmanteau word as its reply. When a professor begins speaking in a university hall, for the lecture to be successful there must already exist a communication relationship; that professor might make the most interesting, new and original statements ever, but the first implicit statement recites: “this is a lecture, accept it for what it is.” When a child begins communicating with its mother through words, communication with her has already existed for some time earlier and is intense, this too being the necessary condition for learning how to speak.

If the utterance-text were to constitute its very own conditions, if it were self-sufficient, if it were not to depend on anything else but itself, if it were, so to speak, autopoietic, this would imply that the utterance in question depends uniquely on the speaking subject’s initiative and on the linguistic system that subject employs. But the truth is that the initiative to speak, like the subject him/herself, does not have a priority in the construction of communication relations. Each time there is a subject, each time there is speech, some sort of communication has already come about, some sort of text has

already been created, is already available, and what the speaking subject says in turn is relative to communication as it has already taken place.

To speak, to be a speaking subject, to be an author, is always to respond—as is the case for any text whatsoever. In fact, the subject and the text may constitute and decide anything, but not the conditions that make them possible. This already emerges from the fact that each time the subject speaks, each time the so-called subject produces a text, that subject is responding (Petrilli, 2014, pp. 169-194). Furthermore, the text cannot constitute or decide anything about its reception, about the way it is heard or read. That to speak is to respond and that speaking can do nothing without presupposing that somebody is listening says clearly that initiative does not belong to the subject, to the I. To communicate is to respond.

Far from being “original” and independent, initiative taken by the speaking subject is other-related, the word of the speaking subject depends on the word of the other, is hetero-dependent, other-dependent: the other with whom the speaking subject is already communicating, to whom the speaking subject responds and accounts to. The “other” under discussion must grant listening as a primary condition for communication to occur as installed by the text: otherness and listening are necessary conditions for successful communication.

Verbal action does not presuppose another verbal action. We know that the word is a response, but that to which it responds—beyond the surface level of rejoinders in a formal dialogue—is not in turn a word, a text, but more broadly a communicative situation which was not produced by speech. The actions accomplished by words and texts at the level of communicative exchange, the “linguistic market,” presuppose *social relations*, *communication relations* which in turn cannot be reduced to the sole relation among words and texts. In other words, the relations that produce relations among words are not in turn relations among words.

An immediate consequence of what we have said so far is that verbal action is not only delimited by nonverbal communicative conditions, but presupposes them. We can even state that in this case it is improper to speak of “speech acts.” In fact, we prefer the expression “verbal *action*.” We propose a distinction between *act* and *action*: action concerns the subject and is connected with consciousness, it is intentional, programmed, already decided, and presupposes the subject’s initiative; on the contrary, the act has already occurred before action thus described. The subject is involved in the act, implies the act, has already been acted, decided, and is subject as in *subject to*. When the speaking subject does something with words, when the subject produces a text, fulfils a verbal *action*, the *act* has already occurred: the communicative action of words presupposes a communicative act that cannot be reduced to verbal action.

3. The “Rustle” of Communication: Between Implicit Meaning and Explicit Meaning

If communicative action decides its own *meaning*, it does not decide its own *significance*.

Performative action can do things *because it is action interpreted as being significant*.

To be significant means *to have value*. And value cannot be conferred by the same subjects who signify with their actions. If in addition to having meaning the performative action of condemning becomes an event that can change things and influence the course of events, this is because it is significant, because it is endowed with sense and significance, with meaning value, weight, import. All this presupposes a preceding communicative act which confers such value upon the performative action. Performative verbal action is action which must be interpreted to have meaning; but in order to be performative action, that is, action capable of having an effect, of exerting an influence over the existent, of somehow modifying it, this action must have already received an interpretation which is antecedent and foundational with respect to the relations installed at the moment of occurrence. Antecedence concerns the work of interpretation which has already invested performative action with significance.

The term “significance” is used by Victoria Welby (1837-1912) in triadic correlation with another two terms, “sense” and “meaning”—Welby denominates her original approach to the theory of meaning and interpretation with a neologism, “significs,” which she introduced in the 1890s (see Welby, 1983, 1985; Petrilli, 2009, 2015). Using her terminological framework, we could state that the “meaning” of action presupposes “sense” understood as a derivative of “to sense,” “to perceive,” “to feel”, and not only as “orientation,” “direction.” In order to be performative, verbal action must be “sensed,” “felt,” “perceived,” if not necessarily by whomever accomplishes the action, certainly by the partners addressed by the speaker in a given communicative context.

Moreover, in addition to sense as connected to listening, feeling, and perceiving, verbal action also presupposes significance. But differently from significance, sense is associated with the senses, with feelings precisely, with the sentiments or passions. Instead, significance is associated with a system of values as they are established and flourish in a given community. This can be a minimal community as in the case of a couple or it may be a more or less extended and comprehensive community as in the case of a city, a nation, a religious group, a global financial group, an international peace movement, etc.

Both Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1961) and Bakhtin before him reflect on the relation between “explicit meanings” and “implied meanings” (see the texts collected in Bachtin e il suo Circolo, 2014). Rossi-Landi distinguishes between “initial meanings” which are explicit and communicated directly and “additional meanings” which are implicit and unsaid, where the former are dependent on the latter. On his part, Bakhtin claims that every utterance is an “enthymeme” because something always remains implicit, as in the case of the syllogism where one of two premises is implied: for example, “Socrates is a man and therefore he is mortal.” What is implied is that “All men are mortal”.

As emerges from the writings of both Rossi-Landi and Bakhtin—less clearly perhaps or at least without special reflection in Rossi-Landi, and manifestly, in greater detail, in Bakhtin—“additional meanings” understood as “implied meanings” are closely related to values. More exactly, when communication is successful in terms of the production of

utterances and of the instances of responsive understanding elicited by them, this takes place on the basis of values that are implied and shared by partners in the communication relationship. Insofar as it is an “utterance,” “performative action,” this utterance, this performative action is not only endowed with meaning, but also with significance. Charles Morris (1964) also reflects extensively on the dual acceptance of the term “meaning” understood, that is, as *signification*, as that which something signifies in a semantic sense; and as *significance*, as the value of what is signified, that is, in an axiological sense. Welby also uses the term “significance” for implied meaning involving values, introducing it as the third term in her meaning triad, the other two being, as stated, “sense” and “meaning” (Welby, 1983; Petrilli, 2009, 2015).

Verbal action stages “explicit meanings” or “initial meanings” on the semantic and pragmatic levels and presupposes “implied meanings” or “additional meanings,” also indicated with the term “significance” to distinguish them from the former.

While the “meaning” of verbal action, explicit meaning on the semantic and pragmatic levels, is in the hands of the speaking subject, the author, instead, “significance” (thanks to which alone verbal action becomes performative) is implied and therefore antecedent with respect to verbal action. In any case, even though, as we claimed above, the speaker does not control the way his or her utterance is understood, interpreted, the significance attributed to his or her verbal or nonverbal actions by those involved in the communicative exchange, the sense of a word, of an utterance, that is, the way this word is sensed, felt, perceived can be determined by the subject to an extent. For example, language has rhetorical or oratorical expedients at its disposal for this. But such is not true of significance which presupposes communicative contexts that preexist with respect to the speaking subject and the text it speaks.

Verbal action can even modify or subvert preexisting communicative contexts by questioning and substituting customary significance values. But this always occurs in relation to a communicative context where the values in question can no longer be taken for granted, are no longer implied. Instead, these values become the direct object of thematization, discussion and criticism. So long as a communicative relationship lasts, whether it involves a minimal community, as in the case of a relationship between the people forming a couple, or the extended community understood in the largest sense possible, the significance of verbal action is determined by the values that are implied in a given context. When significance is questioned by the word, the habitual communicative context, the context which is normally taken for granted, is in crisis.

Verbal action depends on the communicative situation. Indeed, the communicative situation allows for, even calls for the proposal and development of new axiological referents, for the activation of new values and correlated new communicative programs, especially when values and social practice are in crisis. If to question implied communicative values is not only plausible but even conceivable, these values have already suffered a process of deterioration. This means to say that communication is no longer automatic, it no longer proceeds smoothly, but begins to present disturbances,

noise, entropy to the point even of threatening successful communication.

Barthes (1984) speaks of the “rustle of language” (an expression which corresponds to the title of one of his later collections of critical essays) with reference to that system of verbal automatisms which makes language comparable to a running motor, such that the noise it produces is similar to a background rustling noise which nobody notices. In the light of what we have said so far, we propose to speak of the “rustle of communication” which subsists without anybody noticing it, until there is a breakdown in the transmission chain leading from the implied values of a communicative situation to the sense and meaning of verbal action, which make it significant.

If verbal action has an effect, this is only because it is an adequate response to a communicative situation that keeps account of the situation of crisis and contradiction. In this case, too, the word capable of being performative is a response, but at the same time it counts as a new portmanteau word thanks to a situation that it did not produce.

On the other hand, the communicative relations in which portmanteau words are formed, circulate, deteriorate and disappear are never homogeneous or free of internal contradictions. Consequently, as much as the portmanteau word is adequate for a given communicative situation, it resounds in terms of significance because it is also adequate for its contradictions. It is as though that word has a signifying margin which overflows with respect to its functionality to a given communicative situation, an excess which somehow anticipates new communication relationships.

In his essay, “*Criteri per lo studio ideologico di un autore*” (Criteria for the ideological study of an author), Rossi-Landi (1985, pp. 167-182; 1992) evidences the possibility of excess with respect to dominant significance or better, in his terminology, with respect to dominant “ideology.” In fact, as much as the author’s word is determined by communicative reality, it resounds as an “excess” (from this point of view Balzac’s case is exemplary). Rossi-Landi analyses the author—whether of literary or nonliterary texts—as an individual completely immersed in society, but with a few extra complications by comparison with the everyday man. For a better understanding of the author and his/her theoretical production, of his/her texts, Rossi-Landi underlines the importance of historico-social context, considering the author as a representative and interpreter of the process of social reproduction of which s/he is a product: in order to write, the author must take an ideological stand with respect to context as well as perform other intellectual and ethical operations (see Rossi-Landi, 1985, p. 186). Rossi-Landi believes that to reconstruct such operations provides the best criteria to interpret the author’s work from an ideological perspective, remembering that in social reproduction anything human is ideological in the sense that it is part of a social programme built on a system of values—for example, even the way an onlooker looks at a tree. “Hard dry facts,” as Welby would have it, do not exist for the human observer, but are always the representation of sign-mediated, ideological reality.

However, as much as the author’s word may express dominant ideology, to the extent that it is an “author’s word,” the gaze upon the dominant order, upon dominant ideology,

is a gaze at a distance. As serious as it may be, indeed the more serious it is, the more the author's word may resound with ironical overtones, parodical overtones, to the point that it may appear to be making fun of the object, situation, context in question, thereby anticipating lacerations, fractures and contradictions in social reality, which are not yet completely manifest. In this sense the author's word represents an excess with respect to dominant ideology. The author's word is never a totally functional word with respect to the dominant order, even if this cannot be recognized for as long as the dominant order continues to persist. In this case too we need the other, the otherness relationship, and such a relationship will only emerge clearly in the light, in the eyes, of another social form.

4. Sense, Significance, Ambiguity: Reading Welby and Bakhtin Together

Both Welby and Bakhtin contribute to a more comprehensive treatment of problems relevant to sign, language and communication theory today. Reading them together helps evidence the importance of their contribution in this sense in addition to facilitating a better understanding of their respective thought systems. Given that the multiplicity of human experience and the different disciplines that analyze it from as many different perspectives and in its different aspects are all rooted in language, and considering the inexorable relation of signs, above all verbal signs, to values, a general theory of sign and language is foundational for a better understanding of experience itself, its sense and significance. Both Welby and Bakhtin focus a good part of their research on this dimension of signifying processes.

By contrast to those trends in language analysis that emphasize the centripetal forces of language, Welby too like Bakhtin emphasizes the action of the centrifugal forces, as anticipated above. This means to underline, for example, the importance for successful communication of such signifying devices as "ambiguity." Ambiguity, vagueness and polylogism are considered by both Welby and Bakhtin as vital factors in the development of signifying potential and with it of an adequate critical consciousness. To develop critical awareness means to escape so-called "linguistic traps" and fossilization as represented by dogma and the principle of absolute truth.

Ultimately, such traps are set by the logic of identity, that is, closed identity. Of course, ambiguity here is understood in a positive sense as a signifying device capable of revealing multiple worlds, multiple signifying universes that coexist and are interconnected, by contrast to ambiguity understood in the negative sense as that which generates confusion. On her part, Welby in fact emphasizes the need to recognize the value and "true significance of ambiguity" and, consequently, to reflect on "value," experience value, in relation to signs (see Petrilli, 2016, pp. 279-306).

Concerned with the problem of developing an adequate "linguistic conscience," Welby critiques the concept of "plain, common-sense meaning" or "plain and obvious meaning" and the related belief that a text can only lend itself to a single, absolute and final reading,

valid for all times. Working on the live word she too thematized the dialogic nature of meaning and the multiplicity of different interpretive itineraries that can arise from a single text. This approach led her to recognizing such qualities as ambiguity and polysemy as essential characteristics of the word while at once advocating the need to test different interpretive possibilities, alternative meanings, choice of readings, progress in discernment, and to guard against imposing one's own interpretation on a text at the cost of mystifying, monopolizing and misinterpreting it (see, for example, her 1893 essay "Meaning and Metaphor," now in Petrilli, 2009, pp. 421-430). With her "critique of language," she warns against the tendency to homologate meaning, to make the author mean exactly what the reader means, thereby monologizing the text, as Bakhtin would say.

Similarly to Bakhtin and coherently with current developments in interpretation semiotics and the sign model it proposes, sign value according to Welby is traceable beyond the limits of intentional communication: sign value is neither founded upon the logic of exchange value nor even of use value alone, but rather upon the logic of otherness and signifying excess. Sign value is founded on sign processes described by Welby with the expression "significance," and by Bakhtin with the expression "theme."

To return to our considerations made at the beginning of this paper, correspondences can be established between that which Welby calls "sense," "meaning" and "significance" and that which Bakhtin calls "theme" and "meaning." Bakhtin's "meaning" as distinguished from "theme" indicates all those aspects of the utterance that can be broken down into smaller linguistic elements, that are reproducible and self-identical each time the utterance is repeated. "Meaning" thus intended corresponds to "signality," the "identification interpretant," "plain meaning," the centripetal forces in language.

By contrast, "theme" is essentially indivisible. It refers to that which is unique, to that which is individual and unreproducible, it concerns the import and general significance of an utterance as it is produced at a given historical moment, in a specific context. "Theme" is associated with those aspects of signification that require "responsive understanding," a dialogic response, the voice of another, that are endowed with a point of view and valuative orientation. To say it in the words of one of the major exponents of the Bakhtinian Circle, Valentin N. Voloshinov:

Theme is a complex, dynamic system of signs that attempts to be adequate to a given instant of the generative process. Theme is reaction by the consciousness in its generative process to the generative process of existence. Meaning is the technical apparatus for the implementation of theme. (1929, Eng. trans., p. 100)

The boundary between "theme" and "meaning" is never clear-cut and definitive, for the two terms interact and cannot subsist independently of each other: the "meaning" of the utterance is conveyed by transforming it into an element of the "theme," and vice versa, the "theme" is necessarily based upon some kind of fixity of meaning if communicative interaction is to be achieved at all.

For Welby, “sense” concerns the way the word is understood according to the rules of conventional usage, in relation to the circumstances of communicative interaction, the universe of discourse, and never in isolation (this is dialectics described by Bakhtin between “meaning” and “theme”). Welby’s “meaning” refers to user communicative intention; “significance” designates the import, implication, the overall and ideal value of the utterance:

There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as the Sense of a word, but only the sense in which it is used—the circumstances, state of mind, reference, “universe of discourse” belonging to it. The Meaning of a word is the intent which it is desired to convey—the intention of the user. The Significance is always manifold, and intensifies its sense as well as its meaning, by expressing its importance, its appeal to us, its moment for us, its emotional force, its ideal value, its moral aspect, its universal or at least social range (Welby, 1983[1903], pp. 5-6).

Bakhtin’s “meaning” can be related to Welby’s “sense;” his “theme” to her “meaning” and “significance.” Of course, such correspondences can only be approximate given that, among other things, the concepts in question represent different attempts at breaking down a unitary totality which in reality, as anticipated, is indivisible. Theoretical distinctions are always made by way of abstraction and serve to focus better upon particular aspects of signs. Let us remember, however, that not only do signs exist as whole entities, but that they act in relation to each other, finding in each other their specificity and significance in the processes of dialectic and dialogic interaction that characterize semiosis.

The sign’s ultimate value and significance beyond strictly semantic meaning is the focus of Welby’s signification. As such it keeps account of the everyday expression “What does it signify?” and “What does it mean?” This question brings Welby to the question of the moral or ethic dimension of speech life and signifying processes generally, to the question of the practical bearing and ethical value of signs. Signification in fact signals the axiological implications in the relation between sign and meaning, the connection between sign and value under all its aspects—pragmatic, social, ethic, aesthetic, etc. (see Hardwick, 1977; Petrilli, 2009, pp. 288-294, 407-419).

5. More Characteristics of Live Discourse—Silence, Listening, Responsive Understanding

A development on signification is “semioethics,” a term introduced by Augusto Ponzio and myself to underline the relation of sign and behaviour (linguistic and nonlinguistic behaviour) to value (see Petrilli & Ponzio, 2003, 2010, 2014; Petrilli, 2014). Moreover, a semioethic approach to the word, to the utterance, highlights the importance of “silence” and “listening” for successful communication with respect to the deafening noise of the order of discourse and dominant ideology, the importance therefore of responsive understanding from others, of participative response. Bakhtin makes an important

contribution to a better understanding of silence as we are now describing it in “From Notes Made in 1970-71,” where he distinguishes between “quietude” (absence of sound) and “silence” (absence of the expressed, the said word, absence of the voice):

Quietude and sound. The perception of sound (against the background of quietude). Quietude and silence (absence of the word). The pause and the beginning of the word. The disturbance of quietude by sound is mechanistic and physiological (as a condition of perception); the disturbance of silence by the word is personalistic and intelligible: it is an entirely different world. In quietude nothing makes a sound (or something does not make a sound); in silence nobody speaks (or somebody does not speak). Silence is possible only in the human world (and only for a person). Of course, both quietude and silence are always relative.

The conditions for perceiving a sound, the conditions for understanding/recognizing a sign, the conditions for intelligent understanding of the word. Silence—intelligible sound (a word)—and the pause constitute a special logosphere, a unified and continuous structure, an open (unfinalized) totality. Understanding-recognition of repeated elements of speech (i.e. language) and intelligent understanding of the unrepeatable utterance. Each element of speech is perceived on two planes: on the plane of the repeatability of the language and on the plane of the unrepeatability of the utterance. Through the utterance, language joins the historical unrepeatability and unfinalized totality of the logosphere.

The word as a means (language) and the word as intelligibility. The intelligizing word belongs to the domain of goals. The word as the final (highest) goal. (Bakhtin, 1986 [1970–1971], pp. 133-134)

In this context, the word “quietude” simply indicates the absence of noise, a necessary condition for the perception of sound, for interpretation in terms of understanding-recognition of the repeatable elements of discourse (that is, of the system of language). Instead, “silence” is only possible in the human world and is part of the “logosphere.” Silence is a condition for understanding at the level of sense and significance of the word, the live word, the utterance, of that dimension in the production of meaning that is unrepeatable, through which a language participates in the historical unrepeatability and in the unfinalized totality of the logosphere.

Every element in discourse is perceived, therefore, on two levels: on the level of the repeatability of the sentence, of a language, whose only condition is quietude; and on the level of the unrepeatable utterance the condition for which is silence. Silence is the condition for response to the utterance in its singularity. Quietude is associated with language understood as the *langue* and with its physical (acoustic and physiological) substratum. Silence is associated with the utterance and with sense, with the socio-historical materiality of the sign. Whilst quietude is an expression of the logic of identity, silence is associated with high degrees of alterity and is an expression of the properly human. It ensues that silence can reach high degrees of critique and creativity. In terms of interpretive capacity it is associated with responsive understanding and responsible

engagement. According to this analysis, quietude is associated with signality and silence with semioticity.

Taxonomical linguistics and generative linguistics say nothing of ambiguity, vagueness, the polysemy of the word, its implied sense, the understood, deferral in relation to saying, the capacity for *glissement*, extrication, evasion (you ask a question and I smile or change the subject), the capacity for escape from reduction to the order of discourse, to the constrictions of monologism, to the limitations of the doxa; they say nothing of the capacity for shift as understood by Barthes (1978). And yet all such phenomena are essential characteristics of live discourse.

Taxonomical linguistics and generative linguistics know nothing and nothing can they say about literary writing which too is constituted by different forms of silence: according to Bakhtin the writer does not use language directly, but rather has the gift of indirect speech. The writer clothes himself in silence (and this silence can assume different forms of expression, various forms of reduced laughter [irony], allegory and so forth) (1979, Eng. trans., p. 149).

The system of language, understood as a closed universe of discourse (Marcuse, 1964), abolishes that modality of listening—responsive, participative, dialogic—which responds to the sense of an utterance, to its unrepeatability, uniqueness. Listening is one thing, wanting to hear is another:

listening allows for speaking freely, for choosing what one wishes to say. Thus described listening allows for manifestation, expression of the self. By comparison to wanting to hear, listening responds to signs keeping account of their constitutive plurivocality, polysemy, polysematicity; listening recognises and accepts the propensity for contradiction inherent in language, it recognises and accepts contradiction. On the contrary, wanting to hear compels one to speak. It imposes univocality, relevance to a specific request, demand, question; it expects coherence, application of the principle of non-contradiction.

As Barthes writes (with Roland Havas in the entry “Ascolto” [Listening] in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, 1977), listening flourishes in the encounter between the otherness of one’s own word and the otherness of the other’s word. Even more, with Bakhtin the claim is that listening is not external to the word, an addition, a kind concession, an initiative taken by the person receiving the word, a choice, an act of respect. Listening, as Bakhtin says, is a constitutive element of the word. The word, as he says in “The Problem of the Text” (1959-1961), wants to be heard, understood, responded to and again to respond to the response, and so forth *ad infinitum*. It enters into a dialogue that does not have a semantic end (but for one participant or another it can be physically broken off) (in Bakhtin, 1979, Eng. trans., p. 127). The word calls for listening and responsive understanding and, in turn, responds to the response. It is not limited to direct, immediate understanding but pushes beyond, in an open-ended semiotic flux, as part of a never-ending dialogue, oriented by the other, in the dynamics of responsive listening to the other by the other (see

Petrilli, 2013, pp. 16-18, 181-184; Ponzio, 1993, 2008).

Listening is oriented towards what Sigmund Freud describes in terms of the “unconscious,” that is, it reaches out to the understood, the unsaid, the implied, the indirect, the supplementary, the deferred. Listening is not wanting to hear (or interrogating and wanting to say)—unlike listening, wanting to hear is always direct, univocal. Thus described wanting to hear is connected at once both to the absence of listening and to the obligation to speak, that is, to speak univocally (Ponzio, 2009, 2010). Here the question becomes interrogation and the reciprocity that characterizes asking is no longer admitted; interrogation is always unidirectional, it moves from one to the other and not vice versa. Instead, in the relation of responsive understanding, of reciprocal otherness, in the live utterance thus received, the word’s plurivocality cannot be avoided—and with it, neither can misunderstanding (Petrilli, 2014, pp. 139-157). Nor is there a single predicative proposition, not a single predicative, assertive judgement that can escape such a condition. Unlike the sentence, the utterance has a vocation for the other, consequently for listening, responsive understanding, and silence.

6. Conclusion

The worst that could happen to a word, to the utterance, is the absence of listening, the absence of an interlocutor, and the absence of silence. But global communication today imposes quietude in contrast to silence, rather than enhance the human capacity for dialogic, critical and creative participation foreseen by silence as we are describing it. Silence is the condition for listening, for communication in the sign of responsive understanding. Healthy communication is communication beyond the same, communication based on contact, communication which as such calls for and at once presupposes the other’s involvement, the other’s response.

Language and semiotic studies that posit the other as the condition of communication may be characterized in terms of the “philosophy of otherness”. And though such an orientation can be traced in certain authors and trends in studies on signs and language today, the truth is that mainstream approaches are still dominated by the philosophy of identity, by quietude. In fact, studies that focus on the elements of language, on the sentence, only recognize quietude as the condition of the verbal sign, but the space of the utterance in its unrepeatability, the space of responsive understanding is silence. This is the space of intertextuality and of the dia-logics of the utterance.

Studies on signs and language conceived in terms of the philosophy of otherness recover, for that which concerns the verbal, those aspects of communication that the “linguistics of quietude” expunges, with the consequent elimination of the relation to the other, the relation of alterity which is no less than constitutive of the life of the word. Thus oriented, these studies focus on the forms and practices of verbal language which most evidence and enhance dialogue, listening and hospitality in relation to the word of the other. And from this perspective, as evidenced by Augusto Ponzio (2016), particularly

interesting are literary writing and the practice of translation. Literary writing may be characterized in terms of the forms of silence as understood by Mikhail Bakhtin, allusion, parody, irony, metaphor, allegory, as a form of laughter, and as such is today perhaps the kind of writing most capable of asserting the rights of otherness against homologation to identity as imposed by dominant communication.

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