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THE SILENCE OF THE OTHER: THE VOICE AND THE SIGN

ABSTRACT

This paper is about the interconnectedness of the realm of language with that of social interactions, constitutive of all human communities. Arguing against the traditional and still present primacy of the rationally based understanding of language, I wish to stress the possibility of another approach to language, strongly related to the question of the Other. Relying on the idea that the Other is a constitutive part of any linguistic situation, I wish to inspect how it is possible for the voice of the Other to be suppressed or silenced, and if that is the case, how we should understand the silence of the Other. The main result of my findings is that the silence of the Other is not only meaningful, but that it can have positive social and political effects, including the enhancement of the sensitivity for the various modalities of the voice of the Other.

KEYWORDS

silence, voice, sign,
language, the Other,
society, presence,
absence

The problem of intersubjectivity can – and, perhaps, should – be addressed in terms of language and communication. These are the cornerstones of any human community, of any social or political group. And if that is so, then there is surely a possibility to reflect upon social and political domain on the grounds of their constitutive conditions, even if that means leaving aside any particular analysis of any specific political or social ideas and conceptions.

It has been a commonplace in western civilization to consider the realm of politics and society to be rationally constructed, to be founded on more or less rational grounds. From the modern ideas of social contract, as a platform which allows the minimal conditions of functioning for any human society, to the more recent ideas of social engineering and organization of society according to the rules of so-called instrumental reason, questioned in works of the members of Frankfurt school, our view on intersubjective and social dimension has always been defined by our conceptions of rationality. Such gesture is surely reflected in western understanding of the essence of the human being as *animal rationale* and *zoon politikon*; it seems that the social nature of the human being is closely related to its rational essence (Liebsch 2020: 530–531, 540). In terms of language, the corresponding platform for understanding human nature is determined by the primacy of logic, both as the first ever developed

theory on language and as the established set of norms of rational thinking. The formality of logic, especially stressed in its contemporary mathematical form, suggests equal formality and a lack of interest for the grounds of communication between human beings in general, between the members of any society. In such scenarios, when communicating with others, we should disregard any 'subjective' contents or impulses of our speech-position in order to clear the way for the true essence of language to come forth and consequently to allow for the other to be recognized in the conversation – of course, only as an equally formalized co-speaker.

Nevertheless, from the point of view of the actual speech-situation, the ways of logic are often proved to be wrong – not in view of the hiatus between the ideal norms of logic and ever underachieving human nature, but in view of many equally constitutive moments of intersubjective communication which are simply not addressed (nor could they be addressed) in a logical discourse. In fact, contemporary philosophers have already pointed out that language begins not with (logical) propositions, but with the Other and his speech; that is, with my addressing of the Other or, *vice versa*, his addressing of me (Liebsch 2018: 182). With the inclusion of the Other in the discourse about language, the structure of language becomes circular rather than linear (a privileged form of language organization in logic, i.e. deduction/induction), as well as dynamic rather than static. The realm of language is now seen as a dynamic field of various intersections going back and forth in many directions, and so creating a complex web of interaction between particular members of society, acting as specific subjects of language.

At the same time, any given particular proposition or utterance originating from any given subject-point in this web would necessary be open for interpretation and could never have a fixed meaning, not even the one we would ascribe to its author. Since every proposition or utterance is, in advance, possible only as a part of a wider web; since every such proposition or utterance is addressing some other subject-point in the same web, thereby acting upon it and provoking its reaction; since any given meaning is, in advance, constituted by the Other it is communicated to, and cannot be defined exclusively by the one who takes the position of the primary speaker; then the realm of language is, in principle, fluent, fleeing, unstable, and demands a more flexible and more inclusive theoretical account than the logical one. The same goes for the realm of society: it is constituted not by some abstract subject-points in the web of rationally defined social contract, instrumentally governed towards the best rationally achievable results society could accomplish, but by particular persons, influenced by many different and often untraceable circumstances. Human society is, without doubt, the society of differences, and those differences, as we can see on the daily basis, do get their voice, even if that voice is suppressed. The question now is, therefore, what form of voice should be allowed to the Other, in order for it to actually be heard (Liebsch 2018: 200–201)?

Or, to be more precise, there is another more urgent question. Is it possible really to silence this voice of the Other, his actual presence in the language, in

the discourse, in the actual conversation and speech-situation? The fact that the voice of the Other, whoever this Other may be, is often suppressed suggests the positive answer to this question: namely, if there is a possibility to suppress the voice of the Other, than such voice is not entirely stable – it can be present or absent, it can be present in higher or lesser degree. On the other hand, if the Other is a constitutive part of any speech and language structure, if the Other is always the one who is addressed by my own proposition or utterance, or who, *vice versa*, addresses me in the same way, how could he be suppressed, absent, or graduated on the scale of his presence in the communication?

To answer this question, we can easily reach for a yet another commonplace of the traditional philosophy of language, namely for the difference between the sign and the meaning, with the sign being the part of language within the reach of our senses (words being seen as written lines or heard as sounds) and the meaning being graspable only through our rational faculties. As Martin Heidegger insists, such division of language according to the schematics of knowledge faculties ('powers' of the soul) not only promotes the ideology of modern philosophy it originates from, but it also has predominantly metaphysical character (Heidegger 1984: 17–18). Therefore, it cannot be accepted without further inspection of its legitimacy, which, in the case of Heidegger, it cannot prove. Nevertheless, if accepted, the division of language into 'sensible sign' and 'rational meaning' could explain for the suppression of the voice of the Other on a very basic level: the voice of the Other is suppressed in its sensible aspect, since the Other is not allowed to actually speak. Given the fact that the 'sensible sign' is seen as a vehicle for transferring and communicating the 'rational meaning', the Other is also suppressed in this more important aspect, since the 'rational meaning' he wishes to communicate is deprived of its means of communication and transfer. Moreover, such explanation is instructive in yet another respect: only the one who can speak can in fact be suppressed in its speech. Therefore, the relation between me and the Other is confirmed in principle, although it is omitted in practice.

However, the given explanation is rather dubious, for various reasons. First of all, the crucial division on which it is grounded is also a foundation for the instrumental character of this view on language. Namely, if words are only sensible signs and the meaning is a matter of reason only, then the language is reduced to its sensible aspect and it has little or nothing to do with meanings, their creation and organisation. According to these positions, language is only an instrument of our rational soul, similar to our body, and they both – language and body – find their true purpose outside of themselves, in the domain of reason (soul) and its own undertakings. Therefore, one can easily see that this conception of language is in fact only a consequence of the previously mentioned paradigm of rational essence of language, embodied in logic. Many other reasons for discarding such view on language could be enumerated too, the one regarding its metaphysical character not being the least important, but they are secondary to my purposes. What I wish to address here and now is how could the suppression of the voice of the Other be explained from the

point of view on language which was presented before, and which proclaims the Other as a constitutive and necessary aspect of any language, speech-situation or, for that matter, human community?

Namely, if the Other is such a constitutive and necessary aspect of any speech-situation, then its voice cannot be entirely suppressed (Risser 1997: 208). As we know, the voice of the Other can, in fact, be suppressed in the previously mentioned way – as *the voice* of the Other, in its sensible aspect; that was the line of argument I've just presented and discarded. However, the fact that the voice of the Other is suppressed *as a voice* does not necessarily imply that its presence in the language is also suppressed or omitted, for such conclusion depends on the division between the 'sensible sign' and the 'rational meaning'. If we discard such a division, and therefore allow for the meaning to be interconnected with the 'sensible sign', with words as sounds for example, we will reach entirely different conclusion. At first, it seems we have pushed the previous conclusion even further, for if the meaning is interconnected with the 'sensible sign', and if there is no such sign present – if the voice of the Other is suppressed and omitted – then the meaning is surely suppressed and omitted with the sign as well (Risser 1997: 182). Nevertheless, it is not so: the close connection of sign and meaning could also be interpreted in the opposite manner, so that even the absence of a sign is proved to be meaningful and even the lack of signs is baring some kind of meaning, exactly because the relation between the sign and the meaning is undeniable.

The explanation would be the following. If the Other is already seen as always present in the speech-situation, inscribed in the very structure of the language as its integral part, then the Other cannot be removed from any particular language situation, even if the voice of the Other is suppressed, omitted or is not heard at all. In such situation, the voice of the Other would still be present and would still constitute the language situation, but in a different modality – *as an absent voice*. Even as an absent voice, the voice of the Other could still be present, and therefore heard, but it would have to be present and heard *as an absent voice*, that is, *in its silence*. The silence of the voice of the Other, if this Other is in fact a human being (and not the 'Big' Other, supreme being, God), clearly shows the social dimension of the problem of language, as well as the linguistic dimension of the human society, for it clearly stresses the ethical dimension of the language (Liebsch 2018: 183).

Similar point was advocated by Martin Heidegger, in his major work *Being and Time*. Namely, in the passages developing the new fundamental-ontological idea of language, Heidegger addresses the silence as the one of the several constitutive modalities for the essence of language (*Rede*) to be manifested. Since this essence of language is, according to Heidegger, one of the most important aspects of the existential structure – that is, of the ontological structure of human being, it is always present in any situation in which the language is involved; and that would, for Heidegger, cover any situation in which a human being can find itself. In other words, the essence of language is present and governing even the cases in which no word is uttered, even the

cases of silence; thus, the silence becomes one of the special cases of the manifestation of the essence of language, equally meaningful as the case in which the normal conversation is realized.

For my purposes, Heidegger's example is important because of two points. First of all, it proves that meaning can remain, although the voice – the word – can be absent. Heidegger's views on language will change and evolve later on, but the importance of silence will remain one of its central points. For example, in his second major work, *Contributions to Philosophy*, he even speaks about *the sigetics*, as a way of thinking about language opposed to logic, which is supposed to take the traditional place and function of logic in his new philosophical project (Heidegger 1989: 78–79). Nevertheless, the grounds on which Heidegger develops such an account of language and silence will not be the one I will follow any further; as announced, my own approach will stress the interconnectedness of sign and meaning, to which point I will return a bit later.

The second point of Heidegger's importance in this matter is the fact that his account of language is crucially related to his understanding of the intersubjective side of Dasein, which Heidegger names *Mitssein* (Heidegger 1977: 215). Even the examples he uses in *Being and Time* to elucidate his points regarding the silence are such to involve the Other, for it is the Other who understands what I mean by my 'significant' silence, and it is the understanding of the Other which proves that the communication between us took place, although no word was uttered (Heidegger 1977: 218–219). On those grounds Heidegger, finally, develops his understanding of the language as a *dialogue* – and not as a monologue, in an attempt to distance himself from the positions defining the traditional philosophy of language, especially the instrumental one (Lafont 2000: 1–2, 13).

Now, going back to my own line of argument: even if the voice of the Other is suppressed and omitted, even to the point of silence, such voice is still present and cannot be unheard, since the silence is not without meaning. But, how is this possible, if the division between the 'sensible sign' and the 'rational meaning' is discarded, so that sign and meaning are closely interconnected? To this question we have actually reached the answer, but this answer demands a further explanation. Namely, if the voice of the Other is present and echoing even if it is suppressed and omitted, even if there is only silence, then the silence must not be understood as an absence of sign – or as an absence of sensibility. To put it in a somewhat less formal discourse, the silence can also be heard, as much as a pronounced and uttered voice and words.

Heidegger's remark on this conclusion would probably be that we are too inclined to consider silence to be *privatio* of uttered voices and words because we are, mostly without knowing, already subscribing to the traditional relation of the presence and the being. In other words, we are used to consider silence to be nothing – not-being, not-sound, not-word – and therefore we do not consider it to be within the reach of our senses in any other way but as a gap against the blueprint of something that should be there, that should be present and given, but it is not. However, another path of thinking is also possible:

silence and the voicing could be considered as two different, but equally significant and equally important possibilities to express, articulate and communicate the meaning. In those terms, silence could not just be heard, but also considered to have the function of the sign, as much as any voiced or written word. Similar point is often stressed about music, for the absence of sounds and tones – pauses – make an integral part of the melody and of any musical piece (Withers 2011: 351–352).

Finally, if that is so, then our suggested relation between the sign and the meaning would allow for the suppressed voice of the Other to be always ‘present at hand’, to be always heard, to be an element of the social and linguistic domain which cannot be cancelled. In my opinion, such conclusion opens an interesting approach to the question of human society and its constitution, an approach that, so far, has not received enough attention.

Namely, in the society where there is always some Other whose voice is suppressed, omitted or silenced, there is still the Other and his suppressed voice. In western societies this problem is typically reflected from a very specific position – from the position giving precedence to the actual uttering of the voice, be it my own voice or the voice of the Other (Liebsch 2018: 189; 2020: 519). To remain silent in the conversation or in any other language situation usually means to be passive, to show obedience, to accept and confirm, even reluctantly, the supremacy of the one who is actually speaking. Typical example would be the army practice of not speaking if one is not invited to speak, according to the military ranks. Another similar example could be found in education, where students have to raise their hands and ask for the permission to speak to be given from the teacher. Even the common phrase of the ordinary language confirms this: ‘to raise one’s voice’, apart from yelling, also means to fight for one’s (suppressed and omitted) rights, to stand for one’s beliefs in a highly political manner.

However, the other ways of expressing one’s beliefs and one’s opposition to the oppression are also possible. Imagine the group of people protesting in the streets: the usual scenario is for such a group to shout or sing, to give voice to their demands and ideas. Nevertheless, the same group could also be very still and in silence, not uttering a word; their protest would not lose any strength, nor would it be unclear that they are protesting. Given the proper circumstances – say, another group of people with guns pointed at them – their silent protest could say more than any song or shout could. The inversion is similar to the one practiced by Ghandi: if the traditional idea of protesting was defined by the violence raised against violence, then the non-violent protests served not only as a promotion of new ideas, but also as a practice that cuts itself off from the logic of domination and violence altogether.

Moreover, such approach reaches further to acknowledge not only the voice of the Other which can in fact be expressed by voicing or by silence, but also the voice of the Other which can be present *only through silence*, since the Other is already literally silenced, killed. For example, the voices of those killed by the Nazis during the Second World War yet remain to be heard. They are, of

course, given voice through the mediation of the survivors, like Primo Levi, or through the mediation of those who have dedicated their lives to the cause of preserving the memory of those killed, including scholars. Nevertheless, without accepting the possibility of the Other to be present and heard even in the mode of its very physical absence and consequent silence, the actual victims, despite all good intentions, remain silent, for it is not *their* voice that is being heard. At the same time, anyone who ever visited any place of mass killings can testify to the presence of the echoing silence and absence.

What I am suggesting here is the following. The way in which the voice of the Other is recognized as a voice in the mainstream of western civilization and philosophy is reduced to only several paradigmatic modalities, most of which are privileged because of reasons which can be traced back to the set of values and ideas undermining the voicing of the Other in the first place. Therefore, if human society is, as I believe it is, constituted by the ways of articulating, expressing and communicating meanings between the members of society, we should acknowledge and take into account all the modalities of such articulation, expression and communication. The case of silence, which was the main focus of this paper, is surely only one of them, and by no means do I wish to suggest it should be superimposed to any other. On the contrary, my argumentation in favour of silence goes only as far as the silence was – and probably still is – neglected in the context of social philosophy.

Additionally, the argument in favour of silence also does not imply any binary exclusion of silence and voicing. On the contrary, I believe that the changed understanding of silence as a sign – and not simply as a lack of anything, including sign – could further open and endorse yet another interesting domain of investigation of the interconnection between the realm of social and the realm of language. Namely, the case of silence puts forward the question of the ‘sensitive sign’, that is, the entire domain of nuances and variations of an uttered language formation (be it a proposition, a question, etc.). These nuances and variations refer to the various ways of melody, rhythm, stresses and other aspects of language reachable by our senses, which surely contribute to the articulation, expression and communication of meaning, but are almost always neglected as such (except in the case of the arts, of course). In this case too the instrumental understanding of language is at stake, since it proclaims the sensible side of language to be only a vehicle for transmission of mental contents from one consciousness to the other. However, this is simply not the case, which any of us can confirm on the basis of the usual experience with language: if I say ‘Stop smoking!’ in a lower voice, and if I say the same sentence while shouting, I will communicate two entirely different meanings and messages. Taking into account these aspects of language and their constitutive role in the creation and sharing the domain of social interaction would, in my opinion, also be a matter worthy of investigating.

Back to the question of silence and its possible positive political and social effects: adjusting our understanding of language and society to hear the silence (of the Other) would not imply any omission of the actual voicing of the

voice of the Other, nor could it replace it. However, it could contribute to the hearing of the voice of the Other where it was not heard before, including the extreme cases in which such voice has not been given a chance to be heard. If anything, such enhanced sensibility for the Other could serve as a much-needed reason for questioning already accepted ideas and values, since none of those should remain unquestionable. Finally, as the practice of Hesychasm proves, such sensibility is already inscribed in our civilisation, and it would only take an interested eye to discover it and learn from what has been marginalized. If such interested eye is not involved, then we have to ask ourselves: is it really so, that the oppressed Other has to scream to be heard?

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Tišina drugog: glas i znak

Apstrakt

U ovom radu bavimo se povezanošću domena jezika i domena društvenih interakcija, koji konstituišu svaku ljudsku zajednicu. Na pozadini kritike tradicionalnog, pa i sada u mnogome prisutnog primata razumevanja jezika zasnovanog na razumu, nameravamo da istaknemo mogućnost drugačijeg pristupa jeziku, takvog koji je bitno povezan sa pitanjem Drugog. Oslanjajući se na ideju da je Drugi konstitutivni aspekt bilo koje jezičke situacije, želimo da ispitamo kako je moguće da glas drugog bude suspendovan ili učutkan, i – ako je to slučaj – kako bi trebalo da razumemo tišinu Drugog. Ključni rezultat naših analiza je da tišina Drugog nije samo obremenjena značenjem, već da ona može imati pozitivne društvene i političke posledice, uključujući tu i unapređivanje senzitivnosti za različite modalitete glasa Drugog.

Ključne reči: tišina, glas, znak, jezik, Drugi, društvo, prisustvo, odsustvo