

## Lesson 4

### Beyond Communication of the Same with the Same

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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; 5. More characteristics of live discourse – silence, listening, responsive understanding

#### 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. The sentence, the object of linguistics, does not belong to anybody, is not turned to anybody, is deprived of context, of implied meaning, of intonation. A 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, the utterance is endowed with sense and precisely because of this it is exposed to misunderstanding.

The sentence calls for understanding in terms of recognition, 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.: 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.*: 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).

Bakhtin's notion of the text is 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 a still broader context: the intertextual context of dialectic/dialogic relationships among texts. The sense of a text develops along the boundaries of other texts, through the interaction with other texts. As Bakhtin says in an essay of 1959–61, "The Problem of the Text": "The dialogic relationships among texts and within the text. The special (not linguistic) nature. Dialogue and dialectics" (now in Bakhtin 1986: 105).

This conception of the text implies a theory of language that gives full play to the centrifugal forces operative in linguistic-cultural life (by contrast to the centripetal forces). In fact, key concepts in such an approach include otherness, polysemy, and dialogism, listening and responsiveness, all of which are thematized as constitutive factors of the sign, as constitutive factors of the sign's very identity, consequently of language and the text which are made of signs (see Petrilli 2010: 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: 127; see also Bakhtin 1981).

Meaning as articulated 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 other interpretive routes, other signifying pathways as these emerge and develop 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, in relation to the responsive other, to the listening other (Petrilli 2016).

The word, understood in the sense of the “utterance” in live communication calls for listening, which means to say it calls for a response and is, in turn, a response. Meaning-making occurs in such interrelatedness, as a signifying trajectory in a sign network, as an interpretive route at once delineated and yet subject to continuous variation and amplification, by virtue of continuous dialogic interrelations among signs, and through dialogic exchanges with other interpretive routes. Signs flourish in the context of dialogic relationships and as such are characterized by indeterminacy, openness, and semantic flexibility.

Texts are made of interpretive trajectories which always include both verbal and nonverbal signs and know no boundaries in terms of types of signs or of historical-natural languages. All signs can partake in interpretive processes which extend across systemic boundaries, so that mean-making processes are potentially unlimited. However, only small portions in the global sign network (made of verbal and nonverbal sign systems) are ever activated by any one interpreter in a given historical-natural language or, even more restrictively, in a given special language. Nonetheless, all interpretive processes are necessarily part of the same global sign network, so that if an interruption is verified at a certain point in the network this is only because the interpreter has stopped interpreting. But, in fact, only small portions of the interpretive trajectory in the global sign network are ever activated in any given instance, being a question 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, even less so written interpretants.

Here, with reference to Bakhtin’s work, we make a general distinction between two types of interpretants. The “identification” interpretant which enables recognition of the sign. It is connected to the signal, code, and sign system. The “responsive understanding” (or “answering comprehension”) interpretant, the specific interpretant of the sign which interprets sense or actual meaning. This second type of interpretant does not limit itself to identifying the interpreted sign, but rather expresses its properly pragmatic meaning, installing with it a relation of involvement and participation: the interpretant sign responds to the interpreted sign and takes a stand toward it (see Petrilli 2013: 274-275; also Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 6-10). 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). More generally, the interpretant is an *interpretant of*

*responsive understanding* and too can be of the nonverbal order, as in the case of images, graphs, etc., or signs connected with the body such as gestures, intonation, etc.

Hence two extreme poles can be distinguished in interpretive competence by a process of abstraction: “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. Responsive understanding requires involvement with the other, unindifference, listening to the other. When the need for identification/recognition prevails, interpretive work tends toward the monological, the univocal, fixed and set meaning, that is, toward so-called “signality,” where alterity levels are at their lowest; more generally, however, the interpretant is an *interpretant of responsive understanding* which, as stated, may even be of the nonverbal order.

In a paper of 1959-61, “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). [...] (*Ibid.*: 105).

It is possible to proceed toward the first pole, i.e., 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 (Bakhtin 1986: 107).

The text as an utterance is a unique and unrepeatable event and as such calls for the interpretant of answering comprehension. Obviously, just as a fingerprint may be

mechanically reproduced (in any number of samples), a text too can be mechanically reproduced (this is the case of a reprint), a type of activity which simply calls for the interpretant of identification. 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” (*Ibid.*: 106).

## **2. The apparent paradox of communication: to speak is to respond**

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. It defers to what is not verbal communication, but rather nonverbal communication. Unfortunately, prejudice apropos the self-sufficiency of verbal communication, rooted in natural language as well, 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 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 of the verbal order. In other words, the verbal response does not necessarily arise from relationships and sign systems of the linguistic-verbal order alone. The speaker’s utterance 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 limited space, as anticipated. When we speak and communicate, this “event” is possible thanks to communication conditions established previously. We could even make a claim that seems paradoxical — though paradoxes often help to evidence how things stand: when one speaks 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 displays them, furnishing “portmanteau words” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980) which enable partners to remain 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 merely 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 anticipating a complementary portmanteau word as its reply. When a professor begins speaking in a university hall, for successful delivery there must already exist a communication relationship; as interesting, new and original as the lecture may be, successful delivery depends on the implicit statement subtending it: “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 say, 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, just like the speaking subject do not have a priority in the construction of communication relations. Each time there is a subject, each time there is speech, a text of some sort, communication has already occurred, and what the speaking subject says is relative to communication as it has already taken place.

To speak, to be a speaking subject, to be an author, a text, is always to respond – as is the case for any text whatsoever, and in order to respond presupposes the capacity for listening. 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: 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 self. To communicate is to respond.

On the contrary, initiative is related to the other: the other with whom the subject is already communicating, to whom the subject must respond and account to, and not only verbally. In other words, the response is not reduced to relations and sign systems solely of the linguistic-verbal order. And that the other should grant listening is a primary condition for communication to occur as installed by the text: in-textuality, in the relation among texts, the intertextual relation (see Petrilli 1998b: 95–105).

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 far 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 solely to the relation among words and texts. In other words, the relations that produce relations among words are not necessarily in turn relations among words.

An immediate consequence of what we have said so far is that verbal action is not self-sufficient, but rather it presupposes nonverbal communicative conditions. In fact to the expression “speech act”, we prefer the expression “verbal *action*.” In the first place a distinction may be drawn between *act* and *action*. Moreover these terms can also be qualified as “linguistic,” where this adjective derives from language, whether verbal or nonverbal, and not from language uniquely understood as speech, verbal language. But to return to the distinction between “act” and “action”: “action” concerns the subject and is connected with consciousness, it is intentional, programmed, already decided, and presupposes initiative taken by the subject; on the contrary, the “act” occurs prior to action thus described. The subject is passively involved in 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 but rather is the necessary condition for the performance of 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 be invested with 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 denominated 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). In this terminological framework, the “meaning” of action presupposes “sense” understood as deriving from “to sense,” “to perceive”, “to feel”, and not only as “orientation,” “direction.” To be performative, verbal action must be “sensed,” “felt,” “perceived,” if not necessarily by the performing speaker, whomever accomplishes the action, certainly by the partners addressed by the speaker in a given communicative context.

In addition to “sense” connected to listening, feeling, perceiving, verbal action also presupposes “significance”. But differently to 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 established and flourishing 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, more or less comprehensive community as in the case of a city, a nation, a religious group, a



global financial group, an international peace movement, the European Union, the United Nations, the Western World, etc.

Both Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1961) and Bakhtin before him (see Voloshinov 1926) reflect on the relation between “explicit meanings” and “implied meanings” (see Bachtin e il suo Circolo 2014). Rossi-Landi distinguished 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. 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 writings by both Rossi-Landi and 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 reflected extensively on the dual acceptation of the term “meaning”: this term may in fact be understood 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 used the term “significance” for implied meaning involving values, introducing it as the third term in her meaning triad the other two being “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 and speaker intention. In any case, even though, the speaker does not control the way one’s utterance is understood, interpreted, the significance attributed to one’s 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 this 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 modify or subvert preexisting communicative contexts by questioning and substituting customary values in terms of significance. But this always occurs in relation to a communicative context where the values in question can no longer be taken for granted, can no longer be implied. When this occurs the values in question become the direct object of thematization, discussion and criticism. So long as a communicative relation lasts, whether a minimal relation is involved, as in the case of a couple, or an extended relation, as in the case of a large community, 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, no longer proceeds smoothly, but begins to present disturbances, noise, entropy to the point even of threatening successful communication.

Barthes speaks of the “rustle of language” (an expression that corresponds to the title of one of his later collections of critical essays, see Barthes 1984) with reference to that system of verbal automatisms which make language comparable to a running motor, such that it produces something similar to a rustling noise that goes unnoticed. Following Barthes, we propose the expression “rustle of communication” for communicative processes that go unnoticed until a breakdown in the transmission chain occurs. In this case the implied values which render a communicative process significant are brought to the level of the sense and meaning of a given verbal (or nonverbal) action.

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

In any case, 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 the portmanteau word has a signifying margin which overflows with respect to its functionality to a given communicative context, presenting an excess which somehow anticipates new communication relations.

In his essay “*Criteri per lo studio ideologico di un autore*” (Criteria for the ideological study of an author), Rossi-Landi (1985: 167–2; 1992) evidences the possibility of excess with respect to dominant significance, or, in his terminology, with respect to dominant “ideology.” 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). Though this word expresses dominant ideology, it also takes its distances from it, for example, by portraying it with ironical overtones, by joking, by resorting to parody and satire, thereby anticipating lacerations, interruptions, and contradictions in social reality that are not yet completely manifest. All the same, however, this surplus, non-functional word cannot become a portmanteau word, nor can its significance be acknowledged until new communicative conditions are created that allow for this.

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: 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” its gaze upon the dominant order, upon dominant ideology is a gaze at a distance. As serious as it may be, indeed the more it is serious, 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 can never be recognized for as long as the dominant order continues to persist. In this case too we need the other, the otherness relationship: and this will only emerge clearly in the light, in the eyes, of another social organization.

#### **4. Sense, significance, ambiguity**

Both Welby and Bakhtin each 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 favouring a better understanding of their respective thought systems. Given that the multiplicity of human experience and the different disciplines that analyze it under 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 as vital factors in the development of signifying potential and with it of an adequate critical conscience. Critical awareness means to escape so-called "linguistic traps" and fossilization as represented by dogma and 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, on the need to reflect on "value," experience value, in relation to signs (see Petrilli 2016: 279-306).

Concerned with the problem of developing an adequate "linguistic conscience," Welby critiqued 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, monologizing and misinterpreting it (see, for example, her 1893 essay "Meaning and Metaphor," now in Petrilli 2009: 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.

Like Bakhtin Welby too, prefiguring present-day interpretation semiotics and the sign model it proposes, traced sign value beyond the limits of intentional communication: sign value neither converges with the logic of exchange value nor even with the logic of use value alone. Instead, it is based on the logic of otherness and signifying excess. With Welby sign value is specified in terms of "significance," with Bakhtin in terms of "theme."

To return to our considerations made at the beginning of this lesson, 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 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. In the words of one of the major exponents of the Bakhtin 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.: 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 in successful communicative interaction.

In 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”); “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]: 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 the concepts in question represent different attempts at breaking down a unitary totality which in reality is indivisible. Theoretical distinctions are always made by way of abstraction and serve to focus on particular aspects of the object under analysis. Let us remember, however, that not only do signs exist as whole entities, but that they act in relation to each other, interrelatedly and interdependently, 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?,” “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 (see Welby 1983; Petrilli 2009: Ch. 3). She underlines the importance of critical awareness, of “true significance of ambiguity,” of reflection on value in relation to signs and meaning for a better understanding of the value of experience. 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: 288–294, 407-419).

Apart from allowing for a fuller understanding of their respective thought systems,

identifying connections between different authors, in this case Welby and Bakhtin contributes to shedding more light on the problems they each cover relative to language, communication, and the self (cf. Petrilli 1988b). To read a text in light of another, to translate a discourse into the terms of another contributes to highlighting different aspects of the issues investigated. From this perspective, the cultural and chronotopic divide between these two authors favours ideal dialogue and theoretical confrontation.

### **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 and 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, 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 intelligible word belongs to the domain of goals. The word as the final (highest) goal. (Bakhtin 1986 [1970–1971]: 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.: 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, it wants a response and again to respond to the response, and so forth *ad infinitum*. The word enters 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.: 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: 16–18, 181–184; Ponzio 1993, 2008).

Listening is oriented toward 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. Here the question becomes interrogation, and the reciprocity characteristic of asking questions 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 2014a: 139–157). Nor is there a single predicative proposition that can escape such a condition. Unlike the sentence, the utterance has a vocation for the other, consequently for listening and responsive understanding. We will focus more closely on the question of listening in language and communication in chapter seven.