

Conventionality, Indexicality, Iconicity in Signs of Silence

Hamlet: "He has my dying voice.

So tell him, with th'occurents, more or less,

Which have solicited – the rest is Silence".

(V.ii.1.360)

In this paper we are concerned with silence understood as the absence of words. All aspects of the absence of words connected with physiological causes or with various forms of psychopathological muteness are set aside in the present context as we focus on the *ordinary modes of word suspension*, or on cases which, even if exceptional, are sanctioned by a social norm. Thus intended silence itself is a sign. And given that we all know just how eloquent silence can be, to justify this statement would be redundant.

As the absence of words the sign of silence is obviously a nonverbal sign. Nonetheless, a distinction must be made between the absence of words, on one hand, and the absence of verbal signs ensuing from the use of nonverbal signs, on the other. The absence of words resulting from silence is one thing, the absence of words, for example in the use of gestural language, performance of a dance, language of photography, in the signs relating to proxemics (examined by Edward Hall in a book significantly entitled *Silent language*), is another. As belonging to the sphere of nonverbal signs the absence of words should be considered relatedly to nonverbal signs in general, indeed as one of them. The absence of words, or nonspeaking is eloquent insofar as it is nonspeaking and not gesture, dance, etc.

The signs of silence depend on the verbal, on language. Indeed, they are significant in relation to speech. What Roland Barthes (1964b) says of nonverbal social signs in general may be extended to the signs of silence: that with respect to verbal language they are parasitical. The signs of silence are situated in speech like islands where speech is suspended and the space of nonspeech thus obtained is surrounded by speech and is significant *precisely* because of this.

In a book of 1961, *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune* (1998) Ferruccio Rossi-Landi develops the notion of "common speech" which refers to the set of linguistic practices or operations recurrent in different languages, in spite of the differences, and thanks to which translation from one language to another is possible: reflexion on this notion should also include reference to what we could call a sort of "common nonspeech". In fact, more than involving just this or that language, the relation between speech and nonspeech concerns human language in general. We could say that silence is common nonspeech which leaves aside linguistic differences to concern human language generally rather than languages in their specific differences.

In a text entitled "Per una tipologia del silenzio", Gian Paolo Caprettini proposes a typology of silence based on Roman Jakobson's communication model. With reference to the factors of verbal communication he describes silence relatively to the: 1) sender, 2) receiver, 3) message, 4) channel, 5) code; and therefore he distinguishes between: 1) emotional, 2) connotative, 3) referential, 4) phatic, and 5) metalinguistic silence. On our part we propose a typology based on Charles S. Peirce's triadic subdivision of signs into symbols, indexes and icons.

On adopting this approach our aim is to characterize the signs of silence and distinguish between them more than view silence in relation to the communicative process and its various functions.

As understood above the signs of silence must be distinguished from the nonverbal signs of sign language as used by the American Indians, or by deaf-mutes, the signs of gestural language in general or any other form of nonverbal behavior.

We know that according to Peirce a sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect, which means that it creates in the mind of the interpreter an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign, that is, an interpretant (*CP* 2.228). That the sign stands for something in some respect means that it does not refer to the object in its entirety (dynamic object), but only to a part of it (immediate object). Furthermore, a sign subsists for Peirce according to the category of thirdness, that is, it presupposes a triadic relation between itself, the object and the interpretant thought which is itself a sign. And given that it mediates between the interpretant sign and the object, the sign always plays the role of third party.

Signs subsist in the dialectic relation between symbolicity, indexicality and iconicity. The symbol is never pure but contains varying degrees of indexicality and iconicity; similarly as much as a sign may be prevalently indexical or iconic it will always maintain the characteristics of symbolicity, that is, to subsist as a sign it requires the mediation of an interpretant sign and recourse to a convention. Symbolicity refers to the sign's conventional character, to the relation of constriction by convention between a sign and its object as established on the basis of a code, a law. To say it with Peirce: "I define a Symbol as a sign which is determined by its dynamic object only in the sense that it will be so interpreted. It thus depends either on a convention, a habit, or a natural disposition of its interpretant, or of the field of its interpretant (that of which the interpretant is a determination)" (Peirce/Welby, October 12, 1904 in Hardwick 1977: 33). Indexicality refers to the compulsory character of the sign, to the relation of cause and effect, of necessary contiguity between a sign and its object: "I define an Index as a sign determined by its dynamic object by virtue of being in a real relation to it" (*ibid.*:33). Differently from symbols (where the interpretant decides on the object), in the case of indexes the relationship between the sign and the object is preexistent with respect to interpretation, it is an objective relationship and in fact conditions interpretation. The sign and what it stands for are given together independently of the interpretant. Nonetheless, this does not exclude the need to resort to a convention for the relation between sign and object to be recognized as such, that is, as a sign relation. In the case of icons the relationship between sign and object is one of similarity. As Peirce says: "I define an Icon as a sign which is determined by its dynamic object by virtue of its own internal nature" (*ibid.*:33). The icon is a sign whose signifying capacity is determined by its quality. Icons realize a maximum degree of independence from the object, while the interpretant can occur in a system that may even be distant, identifiable neither through a relation of necessary contiguity (index), nor of conventionality (symbol), but of hypothetical similarity. The iconic relation is characterized by such factors as affinity, attraction, innovation, creativity, and alterity.

We mentioned above that all signs simultaneously share in the character of symbolicity, indexicality, and iconicity. It follows that verbal signs, which are fundamentally conventional signs, contain traces of iconicity also. This has been illustrated, among others, by Jakobson (cf.1968) and Paolo Valesio (cf. 1967). But the point we wish to make in this paper is that the different signs of silence also contain traces of conventionality, indexicality and iconicity together and in different combinations. On this basis a typology can be proposed distinguishing between signs of silence that are predominantly symbolic, indexical, or iconic.

Those which obey a convention, a rule sanctioned and accepted by a group or a community are symbols. The different kinds of signs of silence belonging to this group express silence in different ways while sharing the fact that they do so according to a norm, a convention. Examples include: expressions of respect as observed in religious contexts and foreseen by given rites, for instance, in certain phases of catholic liturgy; monastic silence (monastic signs comprise both nonverbal signs as distinguished from signs of silence as well as signs of silence as such. On monastic signs, see Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 1987); furthermore, military silence; the silence of mourning; commemorative silence; silence as protest, etc.

The indexical character of signs of silence emerges with the relation of cause and effect and of spatiotemporal contiguity. In such cases, the signs of silence would almost seem to be symptoms—silence as the effect of a fright, surprise, suffocated anger, resentment, etc.

While in symbolic signs silence is achieved on the basis of a convention, indexical signs of silence are provoked by a cause and are a somewhat compulsory response.

Silence of both the conventional and indexical types present a necessity or imposition with the difference that in the first case, this ensues from accepting a convention, in the second it is passively endured as the consequence of an external effect.

Conventional signs of silence are dominated by what Peirce calls the category of thirdness. In this case the relation between sign and object is mediated by a convention and, therefore, depends on an interpretant. Signs of silence of the symbolic type like all other symbolic signs are not comprehensible without being familiar with the interpretant.

On the other hand, indexical signs of silence are dominated by the category of secondness. The sign relates to the object independently of the interpretant given that the two terms are connected by a relation of cause and effect, of contiguity, as in the case of the relation between fire and smoke, spotty skin and a liver disease, a knock at the door and someone behind it wanting to enter.

Signs of silence of the third type are iconic. In this case silence is not related to a system of conventional signs or to natural causes, but rather is the expression of individual intentionality. This means that the absence of verbal signs is not the absence of language—for instance, monastic silence; nor is it the absence of phonation—as in the case of silence caused by fear or surprise. What we have here, on the contrary, is the absence of the word, of discourse, of the utterance with respect to a presence: the speaking subject says nothing. And this nothing is pregnant with meaning, is endowed with the value of an answering interpretant responding to a preceding word, the word of another.

Signs of silence of the iconic type present themselves on their own account, that is, they have their own meaning, their own signifying potential—like the face of the other (cf. Lévinas 1961). The sign is eloquent without the need of resorting to a code, a convention, without the need of an interpretant, of the conferral of sense by self. Iconic signs of silence are dominated, therefore, by what Peirce calls the category of firstness: signs of silence, or if we prefer, of "taciturnity" (cf. below, IV.3) are endowed with value on their own account.

The iconic sign of silence is dialogic, a response, expresses a viewpoint, a standpoint with respect to the word of another. Here silence is not the result of a convention, nor is it the mechanical effect of a cause; on the contrary, it tells of the autonomy, self-signification and alterity of the other, of the other's signifying irreducibility, resistance, materiality.

Silence dominated by iconicity gives itself as an image, the image of alterity. It has a strong axiological value. As Mikhail Bakhtin would say, the sign of silence insofar as it indicates an evaluation, a standpoint, a relation of consensus, perplexity, conflict, or refusal, etc. is always "accentuated".

In the words of Victoria Welby:

[...] for whether positive or negative, excessive or deficient, present or absent even, our words are of moment always. [...] the *word unsaid*, which has often helped or hindered, and in all human ways signified so much. [...] Yet even in silence there is no escape for us either from danger or duty. Silence is often a most significant declaration, and a most misleading one. (Welby 1985: 40-41)

As says Welby, silence allows no escape neither from danger nor duty. No doubt this is only true of iconic silence where the subject is exposed in its singularity and freedom, and not of symbolic-conventional or indexical silence. Consequently, iconic silence is associated with responsibility. It is also connected with dialogue for it gives itself as a response to another's verbal or nonverbal standpoint, to a provocation, prayer, threat, question, etc. Iconicity, responsibility, and dialogue, therefore, are strongly related in iconic signs of silence.

Bakhtin theorizes the relationship between responsibility, dialogue and alterity in a paper of 1919 entitled "Art and Answerability". The word "answerability"—which covers the two Italian terms "*responsività*" (responsiveness) and "*responsabilità*" (responsibility)—, conveys the dialogic character of responsibility of the iconic type. We are alluding to the condition of absolute answerability, that is, answerability without limitations, without appeal to certainties as established by contract. In this perspective the subject is freed of subservience to the values of coherence, unilinearity, integrity, identity, and authority, and allowed to give full play to its capacity for dialogic pluri-availability, answerability, and otherness, emerging as a subject with the capacity for transgressing the limits of a code, of giving up the reassurances and guarantees offered by a law and, therefore, as a subject endowed with the capacity for unconditioned listening of the other.