

ANNA LISA TOTA

ECO-WORDS

The Ecology of Conversation

ROUTLEDGE


ECO-WORDS

How many words do we use in a day? How many of them are actually necessary to convey the flow of our thoughts? And how many could we do without, if we were to fast, abstain from using words? This book examines the power of words. It explores the links between communication, language and identity, arguing for a certain gravity to the practice of speech, for offering only meaningful words to the people we talk to.

We are the words we hear and utter, we are the words we think, and Anna Lisa Tota invites us to use “eco-words” to change the world we live in: “This book is a proposal to myself and to you, dear Reader, an invitation to change together: while you read and while I write, bridging the temporal and spatial gap that separates us and makes it impossible for us to help each other”.

This volume will appeal to readers interested in the everyday practice of communication. It will also be useful to scholars and students of sociology, emotion, memory, body studies, philosophy, aesthetics, communication studies, psychology, and linguistics.

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Anna Lisa Tota

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*To my students,
future citizens of the world.*



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FOREWORD

Loyalties.

They're invisible ties that bind us to others – to the dead as well as the living. They're promises we've murmured but whose echo we don't hear, silent fidelities. They're contracts we make, mostly with ourselves, passwords acknowledged though unheard, debts we harbour in the folds of our memories.

They're the rules of childhood dormant within our bodies, the values in whose name we stand up straight, the foundations that enable us to resist, the illegible principles that eat away at us and confine us. Our wings and our fetters.

They're the springboards from which our strength takes flight and the trenches in which we bury our dreams.

(Delphine de Vigan, *Loyalties*, 2018)

He who knows, does not speak. He who speaks, does not know.

(Laozi)¹

How many words do we use in a day? How many of them are actually necessary to express and convey the flow of our thoughts? And how many could we do without if we were to fast, abstain from using words? This book is not in praise of silence. To write more than 200 pages just to claim that it would better to be silent would be a real contradiction. Nevertheless, the question posed by Laozi is crucial: speech and wisdom do not always proceed at the same pace. Often it seems that words behave as if they were on a conveyor belt, as if they were an end in themselves. How do we learn to speak and when? At school we are taught grammar and how to analyse

a sentence logically. We learn orthography, but an important part of the knowledge connected to speaking and listening is passed on tacitly (“the so-called invisible loyalties” mentioned by Delphine De Vigan). The aim of this book is to return a certain “gravity” to speech, and for this reason it proposes to speak less, to alternate words with silent pauses so we may listen to the flow of thoughts and feel their quality before deciding whether to express them. Indeed, “speaking well” means “thinking well”. Mahatma said:

Your thoughts should be positive because they will become your words. Your words should be positive because they will become your actions. Your actions should be positive because they will become your habits. Your habits should be positive because they will become your values. Your values should be positive because they will become your destiny.

A lot of wisdom is expressed in only a few lines. To be able to speak and think well is an essential condition in order to be free and authoritative citizens of the world. It is also a necessary condition in order to promote peace, not conflict. In this historical moment all disciplines should contribute, whether or not in the field of humanities: faced by such complex and ongoing transformations, scholars in social sciences must speak out. This book tries “to do” what it says: in this sense, it is a militant text. It is a complex book, though it aims to be simple, because it intends to be accessible to all, including to those who perhaps have less time or opportunities to listen. It is a small wicker basket containing information on how we communicate daily, concise proposals for those who wish to speak well and listen even better. Nothing in it is strictly original, rather it is a patchwork, like those our great-grandmothers used to make: concepts and traditional theories are sewn together, scraps of precious and colourful textiles, with the same technique. This book embroiders concepts, it weaves words, it offers the reader *katas* of verbal defence (and attack, if necessary), but above all it tries to provide the reader with a brilliant pair of glasses to see better and at a distance.

The following pages do not contain strategic recipes that teach how to manipulate, convince, or influence others. On the contrary, in order to speak well and listen better, what the book suggests is to eliminate control and manipulation altogether. If we wish to be spoken to with meaningful words, then what we suggest here is to start offering meaningful words to the people we talk to, because what we offer we will receive in return. It is like finding the “right” channel on the radio: the channel of mutual respect.

Why is it so important to avoid pathological forms of conversation? Because, as we will see, we literally are the words we hear and say. The discursive flow we are immersed in constitutes our subjectivity. If we stop and think about it, how is it possible to preserve our self-esteem if we are constantly exposed to speakers who refer to us as “stupid”? It might be

possible, still, we are forced to deal with the definitions we are given by others. Speaking with others is like dancing, and dancing is always more pleasant if we do not step on each other's toes.

The relationship between identity and words has a very long history, it takes shape at a specific time in our life with a ritual, one that can take various forms depending on our religion, culture, or society. In our own Western culture, for example, the link between identity and words is established by baptism, which announces the birth of a new member to the community.

I remember the moment my son was baptised as if it were yesterday. I experienced it like a gift, because he was baptised by three priests who celebrated the rite together: a humble and wise priest from a little village in the mountains who has transformed climbing into a spiritual practice for himself and the community, and two Jesuit priests who are ethically and intellectually outstanding and acknowledged as having greatly contributed to Italian culture with their thinking and works. We stood in the tiny church made of wood and stone and at a certain point Father Silvano Fausti said: "I give you God's ear, because we are the words we hear". That is when I understood for the first time the real meaning of baptism, as the rite that initiates the process that shapes our identity. Symbolically, by acquiring his own name, my son became a *unicum* and a sacred custodian of the words he would hear from that moment on and pronounce in the future. Baptism marked his social birth, one that occurs after physical birth.²

This book is dedicated to those who have heard inappropriate words during their childhood. In this sense, the book intends to be restorative. If "bad words" have been heard during childhood, the process of adulthood requires the restoration of a certain competence, that of "speaking well" – as if it had been taken away. It consists in starting from how we speak in our daily life: are we aware of the consequences of what we say and the possible harm we cause? We cannot change the way others talk, except by changing our way of interacting. This is a simple common-sense observation. If you are tired of words being shouted at you, if, as subjects, you yearn for more profound conversations, you will find these pages useful.

Finally, half of this book belongs to the person writing, the other half, to quote Montaigne, belongs to the person reading. Indeed, the quality of what is written also depends on the quality of the reading. In other words, this book can teach nothing but what the reader already knows or is willing to find out on her or his own. For the reader it starts where it ends for the author, after her conclusions. The agreement the book proposes is to try "to be the book", experience it: this means not merely writing it, nor merely reading it. This book reminds us that we are the words we write, as well as the words we hear. In this sense, to write a book, as well as to read it, is always also a subversive act. It is about redefining a new subjectivity, together: one's own.

Books can sometimes change the life of the writer, as well as the life of the reader, on condition we are committed to listening.

The following chapters deal with a variety of issues: they provide the reader with a basket, like the wicker baskets once used in the countryside. The reader is therefore invited to fill this basket with all the concepts and the useful ideas that will come to mind while turning these pages. The first chapter describes some models and theories. It helps to outline a framework, which will help articulate the conversation between the book and the reader. The second chapter deals with epistemology, with the delicate relationship between saying and being, reality and narrative. The third chapter helps to identify various forms of pathological communication and is primarily devoted to the Palo Alto School and Paul Watzlawick.³ Are we really able to govern and understand the quality of the communicative processes we take part in? This chapter offers a series of *katas* that may be useful for readers to defend themselves in everyday life as well as in karate; in fact, words can be stones and may seriously hurt those listening. Violence is not only physical, it is also verbal, as many psychologists have demonstrated. The fourth chapter reminds us that speaking does not mean using words only, that complex conversations also involve our bodies. In particular, the expression of our emotions is often entrusted to our body language. This chapter considers the contribution by Gurdjieff⁴ and other scholars who analyse the way in which our body and our emotions speak. The fifth chapter explores the language of space and stresses that, in a pragmatic sense, no conversation can take place outside the “here and now”. The language of spaces can be so strong it is sometimes louder than the voice of people trying to speak inside them. The sixth chapter looks at how biographies can be used as narrative instruments and investigates issues linked to a toxic and, alternatively, a sustainable past. Finally, it posits multiple forms of pollution: acoustic, verbal, visual, and environmental. We are not always aware of how many toxic substances we take in in our daily life. How can we defend ourselves from these verbal and visual pollutants if we are not able to recognise them? It seems a beneficial process of *mithridatism* allows us to develop cognitive and emotional antidotes, by daily ingesting very small amounts of poison. However, are we sure these doses are really so small? This book invites readers to be vigilant and, above all, to defend themselves. Finally, the book is an invitation to silence. As an old Danish saying goes: “If men (and women) have two ears but only one mouth, it is because they should listen more than they speak”.

Postscriptum

It took me almost two years to write this book – from the moment I thought of the initial project until it was concluded – two years in which I was also interrupted by a series of things I had to attend to, as required by academic life. The *leitmotiv* of these two years – should a *leitmotiv* be found – was a

form of partial aphasia, which sometimes literally prevented the person who is writing to speak. It was as if by impeding speech my body were constantly reminding me of how partial and limited all discursive positions are. In the course of time I interpreted the absence of voice as a silent warning and a constant and silent invitation to be humble: I am one person among many, on a voyage like many – we are all part of the same flawed humanity. This partial aphasia is also what prevented me from shouting. The following pages are soft whispers, kind proposals, and gentle invitations. Trying to keep away from all forms of arrogance, they remind readers that the person writing was for some time, long before they arrived, speechless ...

Notes

- 1 Laozi 2009.
- 2 The concept of “social birth” is evidently inspired by Sudnow’s concept of social death (Sudnow 1967).
- 3 Watzlawick 1976; 1981.
- 4 Gurdjieff 1960; 1964.

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

Three years have passed since this book came out in Italy with a major publisher (Einaudi), in 2020, with the title “Ecologia della parola. Il piacere della conversazione” (Ecology of Words. The Pleasure of Conversation). It was followed by the second stage of this journey, entitled “Ecologia del pensiero. Conversazioni con una mente inquinata” (Ecology of Thought. Conversations with a Polluted Mind), published in 2023, also in Italian and with the same publisher.¹ Now I feel it is necessary to change the title of this first volume and call it “Eco-Words. The Ecology of Conversation”. In fact, what has happened is that the second stage of this journey has influenced the first, enriching it with new content and understanding, even for me who wrote both volumes. A book is made of *living matter*, as are the thoughts and words that composed and compose it. So now, with this new English edition, I have the rare opportunity to look back as an author and retrace my steps to add, improve, and edit.

The concept of eco-words appeared – its contours slowly emerging in the background – while rereading these pages, translated by Emma Catherine Gainsforth (whom I thank wholeheartedly for her precious work). While going over the English translation this concept acquired a new consistency which, as such, required further elaboration. In this case the end brought about a new beginning, as if the book were not articulated linearly but circularly. It was not only necessary to recognise and deconstruct toxic words, defensive *kata* and various forms of symbolic pollution, in order to offer a pleasant, beneficial, and nurturing conversation, but a new awareness had to be provided as well, according to which eco-speaking is possible and even useful. But how to define the concept of eco-words and how to distinguish them from toxic words? Here I will attempt to offer a definition

of this concept, which will not however be a linear one, as perhaps some would like, but rather a circular one: that is, I will attempt to paint a fresco of the concept as if I were holding a paintbrush, taking pauses between brushstrokes and listening out for any suggestion that might come from you. What follows is therefore the “defining fresco” taking shape.

Eco-words are all those words, phrases, and expressions that do not reflect any pathological form of communication. They are uttered with the intention of not judging negatively or discrediting the other; on the contrary, they carry an authentic, sincere, and pure intention. *Eco-words* are words that rebuild the silent but vivid connection between our subjectivity and the knowledge of the world. *Eco-words* are alive, vital, nourishing, they produce happiness and well-being wherever they are present. They have the capacity to create deep understanding and produce well-being in the person speaking and in the one listening at the same time. *Eco-words* are always embodied, which means they always both require and impose their corporeity on the content they are expressing, their being a product of the body, in and about the body. Yes, the fact is that words being uttered seem to be heard in a sort of magical dance by all the cells in our body and in the bodies of those listening. *These sequences of eco-words* are, above all, sounds capable of creating real micro-cosmogonies. As we speak and listen, it almost seems as if present, past, and future were constantly coming undone and being recombined, as if, while we speak, these words were contributing with their shimmering sonorities to unravel one future scenario and forge another one in an ongoing alternation. *Eco-speaking* therefore also means following the principles of deep ecology illustrated by Arne Naess² 2005 and consciously taking responsibility for the effects of what we are saying or hearing. I realise that offering you, dear reader, a clear and simple definition of this concept I am describing with a neologism is far from simple. However, if the definition is a difficult one, it is much easier to outline the pragmatic criteria useful to distinguish between eco-words and toxic words and conversations: the former makes us feel good, not superficially but deep down at the level of our soul. When words are inscribed in the body, they question us and then, only then, are we able to comprehend the quality of their resonance. Perhaps this quality can be described with the neologism I am proposing, but there is also a long tradition of thinkers and scholars, pioneers who paved the way we will follow in the pages of this book. In short, to know whether we are using eco-words or listening to them, it is helpful to see whether they meet certain criteria, principles, or so-called rules that enable good communication. It is enough to breathe deeply and listen not to what the convoluted thoughts of our mind suggest, but to the deep feelings our body presents us with. It is useless to devote endless pages to partial explanations of what our body, when we listen to it with respect, already knows. So you will forgive me if I do not take on the theoretical challenge and venture into a long and detailed

list of precise criteria. The point is that I do not think this would be helpful for the journey, the one this book suggests we embark on together using the pragmatics of everyday life. I believe that the complexity of life, which we experience daily, greatly exceeds what any list can offer, especially if it is drawn up individually.

After a lifetime dedicated to study, academic life, and to my radiant students, I have come to the conclusion that perhaps it is true that authorship as a concept does not exist. I believe that in these pages I have collected words and thoughts that come from us all and happily put them together, hopefully in a rather magical synthesis. For this reason, dear reader, I suspect that if you are patient enough and continue reading this book, at some point you will realise that we may have written these pages together. In fact, it is as if life itself were dictating them one after the other, as my fingers type hurriedly trying to write down and give a precise and intelligible form to what is whispered into my ear and to what comes to mind: thoughts, words, phrases heard somewhere else, in another space and time, that now resurface like drifting figures, ready to come forward and be revealed by the keys of this keyboard. Perhaps this is why sometimes I seem to forget almost everything I have written. I reread it with that same interest and curiosity that I usually experience when reading what has been written by another person. I hope that this book of “mine” will give all of us the opportunity for many eco-conversations.

Villadeati, Basso Monferrato, April 24, 2023

Notes

- 1 Tota 2023.
- 2 Naess 2005.

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I would like to thank all the people who over time have conversed with me, offering to me new points of view and original suggestions which have subsequently converged in the following pages. In the last decades I have been in touch with, and have learned a lot from the works of, many colleagues. The list is very long, but among them I wish to remember at least Diane Barthel-Bouchier, Barbara Czarniawska, Tia DeNora, Alexandra Délano, Ron Eyerman, Gary Alan Fine, Cristina Flesher Fominaya, John Foot, Jeffrey Goldfarb, Mark D. Jacobs, Jan Marontate, Christopher Mathieu, Jeffrey Olick, Juan Antonio Roche Càrcel, Barry Schwartz, Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Olga Shevchenko, Philip Seaton, Graciela Trajtenberg, and Vera Zolberg. I know that the list should be longer and I am sorry for all those who I am forgetting. A special thanks to Lia Luchetti for reading the first draft of these pages. I thank my publisher and, particularly, Emily Briggs and Lakshita Joshi for supporting this project from the beginning and helping me with precious suggestions. I thank my son Mattia for our wonderful conversations and for sharing his gaze on the world and his joy of living with me. Finally, I thank my male and female students, who have taught me a lot with their passionate questions. These pages are dedicated to them.

One

THE QUANTUM SELF AND THE POWER OF WORDS

*When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know.
But if you listen, you may learn something new.*

(Dalai Lama)

1.1 Introduction: some erroneous assumptions and preconceptions

What happens when we talk and listen in everyday life? Can we say with certainty that we are aware of the processes taking place? Probably much less than we are willing to admit. The Dalai Lama suggests to us a kind of “general rule”: the importance of silence in each conversation and in all the social interactions we are involved in during everyday life. Silence is a precondition for better listening and for better understanding. There are a number of erroneous assumptions about communication that we can try and correct together. Let us briefly see what they are.

First erroneous assumption. It is generally assumed that talking basically means exchanging verbal content, information about the different states of the world that interest us in a specific moment. Is this really the case? And if so, why is it that sometimes, following a conversation, we suddenly feel a weight on our chests or a sense of discomfort, without clearly understanding why? Indeed, when we speak and listen, sound flows from and to us forming streams which correspond to certain meanings, generating a series of emotional and cognitive reactions. Conversation is primarily a movement, not a static act: when we speak and listen we literally construct worlds, we are not simply exchanging verbal content. As we shall see, during a conversation the identities of the interlocutors taking part are mutually shaped, and the

nature of the relationship that binds speaker to listener is also defined. In this sense, taking part in a conversation means accepting challenges and always requires a certain amount of courage.

Second erroneous assumption. Especially when we speak (but also when we listen), we tend to assume that our interlocutor understands exactly what we wish to communicate and, conversely, we think that what we understand corresponds exactly to what our interlocutor wishes to tell us. As Stuart Hall¹ pointed out a long time ago, things are actually very different. Things are much more complicated than they appear to us at first sight.

The third erroneous assumption is a corollary of the second. We tend to think that communicative processes only work if misunderstanding is eliminated. On the contrary, misunderstanding is an unavoidable and essential part of all complex communicative processes. Instead of trying to ignore, exclude or minimise misunderstanding, it is better to deal with it and laugh about it when something goes terribly “wrong”. Misunderstanding, in fact, is what turns every communication process into a worthwhile adventure, with its surprising, hilarious, painful, or unexpected outcomes. Even the most seemingly neutral communicative exchange can acquire totally unexpected meanings: for instance, if I ask a passer-by: “What time is it?”, he may think that I wish to know the time, that I am trying to distract him so that my accomplice can steal his wallet, that I wish to chat him up because I am interested in him or that I am actually going to ask for money or for a favour. Depending on the context, on the interlocutor, on shared past history, this same message lends itself to a very wide variety of interpretations. For example, if I were to ask my partner this same question, having previously asked for a wristwatch as a gift that I have not yet received, my request might seem like a gentle reminder, a way of telling him I would like to have the watch he promised. He might reply with a smile: “You really do need a watch”, while in fact I might just want to know whether we are late for an appointment.

A fourth erroneous assumption is to think that what we communicate depends mainly on the words we use. In actual fact, we speak with our body, hands, movements, gaze, posture, voice inflection, pauses, and interjections. Fingers nervously drumming on the table say more about us than anything we say with words, while trying to hide how nervous we actually are. In fact, when we listen to a message, we are well aware that we lie much more easily with words than with our bodies. So why is it that when we are the ones speaking, we pretend this is not the case?

Fifth wrong assumption. “To be interesting and intelligent, one must have something to say”. This assumption is completely false. In fact, sometimes the opposite is true: the words of people who talk all the time tend to be shallow, because talking all the time makes it impossible to align communicative systems and thus to communicate effectively. Why does a

pause, a silence lasting more than a few seconds cause us embarrassment? The reaction is cultural: there are countries where different languages are spoken and where, unlike what happens in Italy, silences and pauses are not “banned”. In Finnish culture, for example, silence is considered an integral part of conversation. If I keep silent, it is because I am prepared to listen. It does not mean that I am stupid; on the contrary, it means I am reflecting, and that when I finally speak, I will have something relevant to say. This assumption is culturally determined with reference not only to the nation of origin, but also to whether one’s place of origin is urban. The idea that fluent conversation expresses one’s manners seems to be more common in cities than in the countryside.

Not long ago, I believe it was a Saturday afternoon, in a small town in the Monferrato area, in the north of Italy, I became absorbed by the sight of a group of retired gentlemen sitting at a table in a bar. What struck me was that they were all sitting around the table but no one was speaking. There were six men, just sitting there, not exchanging a single word – they merely looked around. This situation of enduring silence would have been unbearable for me but they were not at all embarrassed. On the contrary, these elderly gentlemen seemed perfectly at ease, as if a silent conversation were taking place among their bodies. They sat there in a circle reminding each other that they were friends, simply reinforcing this relationship of solidarity and friendship day after day, in the course of those silent sessions: they were simply there. That was what counted: being there, not the words they exchanged. None of them were particularly well educated, although none were illiterate. They did not even read the paper, which was made available to customers on the table next to them. The TV in the bar was turned off. In short, they did nothing at all: they simply sat there.

Sixth erroneous assumption. Words do not count, only actions. However, words, like thoughts, are actions, though of a different kind. What makes them different? To use a metaphor, we might say that what differs is the intensity and density of the matter composing them and that for this reason, while the consequences of an action are immediately visible, the effects of a word and, *a fortiori*, of a thought, require more time to become visible. To believe that thoughts – which are essentially words uttered in our minds in silent conversation with ourselves – have no effect on reality does not help, because this assumption deprives us of an important part of our ability to be free. Obviously, thoughts, words, and actions cannot be considered as being entirely equal, but neither can we exaggerate their difference to the point of convincing ourselves of the irrelevance of words and thoughts. The little power acknowledged to words (and the almost non-existent power attributed to the flow of thoughts) may well be a consequence of the process of *Entzauberung der Welt* (disenchantment of the world), as described by Max Weber.² Indeed, in a world governed by magic, words count. If a witch

casts a spell on someone, this person turns into a mouse or a monstrous being. In a world governed by magic, no one would ever dream of saying that words do not count, because magic connects words and actions. Words are performative utterances, in the sense proposed by John Langshaw Austin.³

Another erroneous assumption concerns the way we focus on what is being said in a conversation. Listening, in fact, does not mean being subjected to hypnosis. Conversing is a bit like dancing the tango: one has to rely on the flow, on the movement of the other, but not as a “deadweight”. In fact, it is in gentle resistance that our presence manifests itself. When we converse, we must exercise vigilant attention: we must know how to be immersed but also detached, focusing also on what is happening in the space outside this conversation. It is important that “the conversation system” in which we participate remains an open system. A good example of this is a situation we are all familiar with: we have all happened to observe a traveller on a train who is paying so much attention to the person he is speaking to on the phone that he appears to be detached from his surroundings, the carriage in which he is travelling. This haughty gentleman does not realise he is raising his voice while sitting in a silent carriage; neither does he realise that he is talking about sensitive and private matters in a context where dozens of people are listening to him. He appears to be trapped inside a space capsule located somewhere else, in a space he is not sharing with the rest of us. However, his body is sitting just a few metres away, bothering us with its indecent absence. This traveller converses inside a closed system, as if hypnotised by the flow of words, “glued” to his interlocutor, entangled in the flow of words, almost stunned by them. He does not seem able to exercise his faculty of being aware both of the conversation and of what is going on outside it. He cannot be voluntarily inside and outside what is happening. Ultimately, he is at the mercy of this other and also of us all.

The last erroneous assumption concerns emotions. Perhaps also as an immediate consequence of the disenchantment process mentioned earlier, we tend to ignore our emotions or, rather, we tend not to pay attention to how they are conveyed, how they work and how they can be transformed. Generally, we go about our daily life like *automatons*, entering situations and being overwhelmed by the emotions we encounter. We allow ourselves to be trapped in anger, in joy or envy, mistakenly thinking we cannot help it. Now, consider the following social experiment: one morning you leave your house and try to maintain a state of focused tranquillity for a few hours. Now imagine you run into a neighbour who is angry because he has quarrelled with his wife: he will be furious with you for some trivial reason. Annoyed at having been insulted for no reason, you will respond in a similar way: you will also become furious. That is how it works. But what kind of people are we – George Ivanovich Gurdjieff would ask – if we are not even capable of deciding for ourselves what emotions we are willing to experience on a

particular day? Is it enough to run into someone who is out of his mind to grant him the power to take us on a journey through a series of emotional territories of his choice? Who is in charge here, our neighbour, who has a quarrel with his wife? Are we not in command of our emotional states? The problem is that emotions stick like glue: if we do not know how to handle them, they stick to us and invade us like a large colony of bacteria. Who teaches us how to communicate and/or transform emotions? Emotions are flows of energy, they are like the waves of the sea. If we decide to go into the water when the sea is rough, we do not just jump in. Rather, we need to somehow make contact with the waves, “listen to them”. These are not esoteric precepts: any averagely skilled surfer or windsurfer has learned this the hard way by being hit by the waves, and because of this has become quite good at it. The anger of others must also be “stroked and listened to” while carefully keeping a distance, just as one does with a powerful wave. Other people’s emotions certainly cannot be ignored, especially if the person in question is passing near us, but what we can do is be aware of the fact that these emotions belong to *another* person and that they are not necessarily our own. Secondly, we can decide what we want to do with them. In other words, there is *always* an alternative and, even if we only realise this retrospectively, we might say *better late than never*. The process of transforming emotions is, in fact, an alchemical process which, incidentally, can be accomplished in an atemporal space, which means also decades after something has happened.

Let us open a brief but important parenthesis here: it should be noted that this characteristic of the emotional substratum (i.e. its timelessness) is what has allowed all kinds of therapists to make a fortune: it is in fact possible to also transform an emotion linked to a traumatic event that occurred during childhood forty years later, and thus literally transform the meaning of what took place in our psyche. We will return to this aspect at length in chapter four, but here it will be enough to stress that emotions seem to overwhelm and dodge the laws of linear time, bypassing them right and left, like breakers. This is why traumatic emotions tend to ignore the fact that they originated in the past, at a certain point in our biographical timeline (e.g. in our earliest childhood, when we were four years old) and continue to overpower us today, as if time had frozen and we were still the children of yesterday. Trauma suspends time, transforming space and our own identity. The time and space of trauma follow their own laws that interrupt the flow of consciousness. In general, the laws governing emotions follow autonomous paths which need to be considered.

1.2 The process of signification is a creative act

How often do we get the wrong end of the stick? The process by which we attribute meaning to what we hear in everyday life and the ways we do this

far surpass the imagination of the smartest interlocutor. Misunderstanding is part of all communication.⁴ Imagine the following dialogue between husband and wife:⁵ she is driving the family car and he says: “Hey ... the traffic light is green!” The many responses she might give and the underlying signification process that generates them vary along a very wide spectrum.

1) The wife might respond: “Do *you* want to drive?”, or: “You’re so rude. Do you think you’re a better driver?” In this case the wife is responding to an intention she attributes to him, as she feels his intention is to offend her and belittle her skills as an expert driver. In this case she ends up confirming (with her opposition/rebellion) the stereotypes concerning the way women drive that are widespread in Italy.

2) The wife might reply: “Listen, I’m not blind. I can see very well, better than you actually”. This is a variant of the previous answer: in this case she feels that his intention is to discredit her as a person who may well be able to drive, but can no longer see very well. If the couple in question is elderly, then this type of response is credible. Both answers start with the assumption that the husband is judging his wife.

3) Suppose, instead, that the husband utters this sentence because of his own state of mind, to express a personal need: “I’m in a hurry. I want to get there as soon as possible”. In this case the response might be: “Are you in a hurry? Are you late?” The answer would be neutral, i.e. it would not assume the husband’s intention is to offend.

4) However, there is also another possibility. The wife might reply: “Are you in a hurry also today? You are always doing this! You should stop nagging everyone around you!” In this case the wife does not believe he wants to offend her; the idea that her driving skills might be inadequate, that she has poor eyesight, does not occur to her; on the contrary, it is she who intends to offend him. In fact, in order to discredit him, she might say: “You’re always in a rush for no reason, all you do is bother those around you”.

5) The wife might even want to offend her husband by saying something ironic like: “Thank goodness I have you. I don’t know what I would do without you”.

6) The wife might simply smile and reply: “Thank you!” and continue driving at the speed she wants and ignore her husband’s remarks, whatever his intention might be. No answer can be considered as being universally right, because all answers depend on the context, the circumstances, and the individuals involved in the dialogue. What interests us here is to look at how the same sentence, the exact same sequence of words, can lead to different interpretations and therefore generate very different responses. Clearly, the husband’s remark is not uttered in a void, it will fit into a sequence, a relationship with a history and an identity, which will heavily influence the type of answer that follows. In this sense, daily conversations intersect with one another, they form a sort of dance: the words we say and hear form sequences, stories, habits, they consolidate beliefs and identities. The streams of words we say and listen to trace paths in the ground, invisible paths that grow into trails and dirt

roads, and over time they become so consolidated they eventually look like paved roads.

If we keep on hearing words that are wrong, that do not correspond to us at all, we become other than ourselves, we alienate ourselves to the point we no longer recognise ourselves. We do this to meet the expectations of others, of that hypothetical other who is constantly judging us, but who does not, however, correspond to any particular individual. It is the “other” that resides inside us: we have literally imagined and invented it and it only exists in our heads. It is an external model, a kind of yardstick used to measure and weigh, which we use to scrutinise our own behaviour and thoughts. An inner monster that plagues us and all those around, demanding we throw ourselves to the wolves, giving it all our thoughts, ideas, and words. We feed this monster day after day, even though it generates only destruction and pain, psychosis and illness.

Was it not simply a matter of attributing meaning to a sequence of words? Is that not where we started off? The fact is that the act of giving meaning is very powerful, it can nourish or destroy, it can free or enslave. Giving meaning is a potentially revolutionary act in itself, as it fully expresses the sense of our free will. However, in order for it to be such, the act of giving meaning requires taking on responsibility, it requires seeing oneself reflected in the words of the other – in these words I see myself, I see my history, my strength, and my wounds, and I acknowledge the only answer I decide to give as intrinsically “mine”, knowing that this answer is my portrait, just as the question is always the unfinished painting of my interlocutor.⁶ Clearly, there are many possible answers and a number of portraits to choose from, as we have seen in the hypothetical dialogue between a husband and a wife that takes place in a car.

Annotation

It was a cold winter morning; the sun was bright; it was the kind of day we only have in January. I was driving with my ex-husband in Basso Monferrato along one of those country lanes that make us feel at peace with ourselves. I was totally absorbed: I was contemplating the light transfiguring the landscape, the mist covering the hills that rendered everything so magic; every now and then a bell tower emerged from the fog, an indication of a village in the distance. I was so absorbed and grateful for the beauty I was being offered that I did not realise how slowly I was driving, almost at walking pace. There were no cars on the road. Only my old car, which seemed to be plodding along in such beautiful surroundings. Suddenly, my ex-husband said: “Shall I get out and push?” I burst out laughing and replied: “That’s so funny!” I could have replied: “Are you in a hurry?” or used any of the other variations already considered. However, the answer is my portrait and that is the answer I chose to give on that day.

That morning I could also have been offended, imagining that my ex-husband was questioning my driving skills. What were his real intentions? Indeed, this is what it is all about, the way I jump to conclusions based on what I think his real intentions are: “My interlocutor wants to offend me, so I feel offended”. However, we must also ask ourselves: are his intentions really so relevant? If I give another person the power to define our social interaction, I will always be “at the mercy of others”. Ultimately, why should knowing his real intentions be so important? A healthy pragmatics of conversation leads me to choose to *decide* what his intentions are and, above all, it implies that I effectively prefer *those most favourable to me*. This is an effective defensive *kata* that allows me to dodge the attack, simply because I prevent it from taking place. I deconstruct the meaning of the sequence of words before it acquires its definitive form. I deconstruct it with my laughter. I ignore it and turn it into what suits me best. I am not saying that this promising recipe works all the time: for the most serious offences, it probably does not. However, in many cases it is an available option and must be taken into consideration.

I remember two colleagues I met early on in my career: the first was a respected scholar, we could say he was a man of integrity: my colleagues nicknamed him “I hate, therefore I am”, creatively rephrasing the famous Cartesian line. From our point of view, Mr “I hate, therefore I am” was extremely rigid in his way of interpreting and defining the social interactions he was involved in: he would never ignore a remark he thought was rude, nor would he make up with a colleague he had disagreed with – years later he could still remember the smallest details. I had another colleague who was an esteemed scholar and a woman of power. She was the exact opposite: she seemed to be as resilient as rubber – I have never met anyone else with such qualities. She was never offended, simply because when someone did something that might have seemed wrong she would take no notice, and this meant she was immune to all possible offences. At a certain point, due to a sudden turn of events, she found herself occupying a very powerful political position, and also in this new role, the way she skilfully avoided being exposed made her impenetrable. If, for example, someone decided to force her to a long and unnecessary wait, as a way of trying to discourage her, she would respond with a charming smile, she would relax and say: “How nice it is to be able to take one’s time. Please, don’t hurry. I’m not in a rush today”. This would take her interlocutor by surprise, who awkwardly realised they had been defeated before they had even started.

1.2.1 The question is my mirror, the answer is my portrait

Giulio is a fifteen-year-old boy who attends a classical high school, with a focus on humanities, in Milan. He continues to address one of his classmates,

Federico, with insults: he repeatedly calls him “faggot” in front of his classmates. Federico, also fifteen, does not think he is homosexual, even though, not having much experience, he is not even sure about his sexual identity. Federico is deeply hurt by Giulio’s words, and cannot simply ignore him, also because if he does, the bully only becomes more insistent. Giulio keeps asking Federico: “Are you a faggot?” His tone is very aggressive and, as if this were not enough, he makes fun of him in public. He uses details of Federico’s clothes to confirm his hypothesis (his designer shoes, his cuffed jeans). What is happening to Giulio? Federico is a very handsome boy and thinks he could work as a model in his free time. Probably Giulio is attracted to Federico. So Giulio is experiencing an attraction for his handsome and elegant classmate. He comes from a very conservative upper middle-class Milanese family, perhaps he has heard some adult (his father or grandfather) use the word “faggot” with a derogatory meaning. At home he must have picked up that being homosexual is a horrible sin, something that deserves mockery and discrimination. When he is with Federico (the fact that Federico is attractive makes Giulio a potential homosexual) his reaction is aggressive: “Are you a faggot?” Giulio’s question is in this sense a mirror that reflects his own fears of being homosexual. The situation becomes complex, as Federico, for his part, is not completely sure of his heterosexuality. Federico has never heard any adult in his family call anyone else a “faggot”. This word is offensive to him, because he has openly homosexual friends whom he respects and looks up to. Federico’s answer is his portrait: “Your behaviour is rude and unpleasant”, he tells him, trying hard not to insult him in turn. What could Federico do to stop having to put up with these comments and help Giulio understand that his behaviour is wrong? Indeed, it is actually Giulio who needs help: “Are you a faggot?” means “Does the fact that I am attracted to you mean that I am homosexual and therefore, according to my father, I am a ‘faggot’? Do you have the power to turn me into a homosexual?” This is the real question. Obviously, Federico cannot openly tell Giulio this, even though he is intelligent and mature for his age and perfectly able to understand that this is the real problem. The situation escalates because Federico, who is annoyed and offended, increasingly ignores Giulio and behaves indifferently. Giulio, however, cannot stop on his own, because his is a cry for help. He has a problem (he is attracted to his handsome and elegant classmate) and, not knowing how to deal with it, creates a problem for his companion. What is a possible solution to this problem? We cannot change another person’s question, but we can modify our answer, if we understand that more than one answer is possible, and take responsibility for the one we decide to give.

“What is his problem?” “What is my problem?” If placed at the beginning of a conversation, which presents itself as potentially disastrous for us and our interlocutor, these two simple questions could spare us a lot of trouble and save a lot of energy. We need to remember that there are no “necessary”

answers: in a conversation there is never only one route to follow, no path is obligatory, and this means we can experiment with alternative sequences, we can innovate. The answer we choose to give is literally our portrait because in hindsight we sometimes find that it also contains an answer to the question: “What is my problem?” Obviously, this does not apply to all kinds of communicative exchanges, but only to those in which there is a representation of us and/or of others at stake, which is more often than not.

1.2.2 *The overly sensitive ear syndrome*

Friedemann Schulz von Thun⁷ reminds us that some people have a kind of tendency to interpret everything they are told as a comment, an assessment of their abilities and/or qualities. Clearly, what is said to us may well imply this, however, it is as if in some cases a person’s psychological wounds, fragile identity, and insecurity make him or her more vulnerable (touchy, for example), as if everything taking place around these people had the shape of a knife. This type of person seems to be in such existential pain and seems to go around with a deep wound that almost magically ends up “attracting” sharp and piercing words. When conversing with such an interlocutor, it is difficult to step out of the prefabricated role that he or she constantly forces us into. As an example, Schulz von Thun presents an extreme case.⁸ One person says to an acquaintance: “Nice weather today!” and the other replies: “I know you think I’m a superficial person, but the fact that the weather is the only topic you think we can talk about is just too much!” Or: “In my opinion you are really good at your job”. Reply: “You say that only to comfort me”. Schulz von Thun⁹ coins the expression “one ear longer than the other” to speak of this particular dynamic underlying reception: people hear in an altered way, because they hear with an overly sensitive ear. What should one do in such cases? It depends. If we are the ones responding like this and we finally realise it, we have a problem to solve and must learn to be increasingly aware, to the point we finally become able to stop playing the role of eternal victim – a role we are actually indulging in. If, on the other hand, it is another person, it is very difficult to intervene, indeed sometimes we even risk making the situation worse. However, knowing that a person habitually adopts this mode of response (i.e. suffers from the “overly sensitive ear syndrome”), we must make an effort to mentally tell ourselves, whenever we interact with him or her, that “in no way do we intend to offend this person”. Which means: we can avoid the bickering, the feedback, let it go. We can stick to our knowledge that this person has a problem, which is more or less serious, and which therefore deserves our respect. We may visualise him or her as someone who has badly injured a leg or an arm and keeps banging this injured limb, also by running into us who are standing there motionless. Or we might imagine this person walking around with one shoulder much lower than the other, which makes it impossible to stand up straight – this person is in fact carrying an

enormous crate of heavy wood on this shoulder. There is no point in getting angry and asking this person to stand up straight: either we manage to help him or her remove that crate of wood or the communication will carry on in a distorted way, the same as his or her posture. This metaphor means that when we talk to a person, we are also encountering their problems and their wounds: to see them we must practise listening and, above all, we must not be entirely engulfed and focused on our own wounds, or we will end up dealing with these only. Let us consider another example also provided by Schulz von Thun.¹⁰ A father comes home from work in the evening, he goes into his son's room and says angrily: "What a mess! Your room looks like a pigsty!" The son has two options: he can say to himself: "See, my father thinks I'm unworthy, he thinks I'm bad and that I'm a burden". Or he might say: "Poor guy, he must have had a bad day and now he's taking it out on me, which is not fair". Which version would you prefer for your child or yourself?

There is another type of overly sensitive ear syndrome, which is just as interesting and complex: when someone talks to us, this person is often trying to make us do something. This is not necessarily manipulation; however, a conversation often implies a request. Some people have been forced to such an extent to take care of others since childhood (they had a single mother, a sick sibling, younger siblings to look after) and as adults they interpret everything that is said to them as a request to "do something", so they do it, even before they are specifically asked to do so. For example, if you talk to such a person and say, "It's hot today!", a likely response will be: "Shall I open the window?" Or, when asked: "Is there any juice left?", the likely response will be: "I'll make you some more right away". There is an indirect way of asking for something that sounds familiar to these people. This indirect way of formulating a question has an advantage: as the question is not formulated directly, it offers the interlocutor the possibility of not granting a request, without having to respond with a denial, which would probably create embarrassment. However, insofar as the request for action is implied but not formulated openly, i.e. it is hidden in the question, the person asking can also avoid thanking and returning the favour. Once again, there is no right recipe for all situations: we have to observe what happens and understand what a single occurrence means *for us, at that precise moment and in that specific context*.

1.3 Communication systems

It is said of psychologists that they explain what everyone already knows, but using a language that is incomprehensible to everyone.

(Friedemann Schulz von Thun)¹¹

Under no circumstances will the following pages *explain what everyone already knows, using incomprehensible words*. Let us leave behind that kind

of scientific language which, instead of explaining, excludes and categorises its interlocutors according to their ability to understand the abstruseness it exhibits. The concepts and distinctions proposed below will serve to lead the reader along a reasoned path, to understand more (not less) and to see more clearly. The answers provided will not always be unequivocal, the kind that make us feel comfortable, because communicative processes are complex, not comfortable.

The term “communication” derives from the Sanskrit root *com*, later to be found also in ancient Greek and Latin. Looking at the etymology of a word allows us to reflect on the thoughts that gave rise to it and to highlight possible semantic changes and/or shifts in the original meaning. The ancient Greek word for communication is ἐπικοινωνώ, while in Latin we find the root *cum* together with *munis*. The original definition of this word, at least as it was used in Greek and Latin societies, refers to “making something common”, also emphasising the sense of function, duty, sharing. Nowadays, in Italian, as well as in English, the term communication seems to have moved away from its original matrix to allude mainly to some form, more or less complex, of transmission. In German, on the other hand, the original meaning seems to have been better preserved: *die Mitteilung* is composed by *mit* (with) + *Teilung* (where *Teil nehmen an* means “to take part, to participate in”).

“Communication” is a very broad term, as it refers to a number of concepts. We can define communication as the process through which a sender, using a set of expressive codes, formulates a certain message (encoding) and entrusts it to a certain channel. In turn, the receiver must decode (a task that implies transcription, interpretation, and possible feedback) to appropriate this message. Formulated in this way, it might appear to be a simple process, while in fact it is not. One of the first and much debated questions concerns the intentionality that must always accompany the communication process: according to some scholars, when this intentionality is lacking it is useful to distinguish between communication (which is always intentional) and information (not intentionally transmitted). According to this distinction, the social class of the interlocutor (which, for example, one is able to infer from the clothes a person is wearing) would not be communication, but information. Other scholars have instead argued that we always communicate.¹²

We can also differentiate the term “communication” from the concepts of social interaction, dialogue, and conversation. The first concept is the broadest: it is a pivotal concept in social sciences. The definition proposed here, far from being the only one possible, is rather an operational definition: a sort of temporary pact between author and reader useful to understand each other when using this term. Thus, we can say that social interaction (a term that in sociology is often associated with “social relation”) implies a cooperative and/or conflictual relationship between two or more social actors

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