

## The Communicative Force of the Body. Constituent problems of gesture semiotics

**Abstract.** It is said that Friedrich II has undertaken in the XIII centuries an experiment through which he was trying to discover the primordial language, spoken in Paradise, by raising children to whom no one has ever spoken. As it is well known, the end result of this experiment was the death of the subjects. This experiment is absolutely revealing for the way in which the Occident situated the body outside the sphere of communication. For it is almost impossible for these children not to have interacted with their caretakers, not to have gesticulated, howled or expressed their happiness or sadness.

To consider and define body language as an essential attribute of the human being represents the main purpose of the present study.

**Keywords:** body, gesture, semiosis, public communication, performance.

It is said that Friedrich II has undertaken in the XIII centuries an experiment through which he was trying to discover the primordial language, spoken in Paradise, by raising children to whom no one has ever spoken. As it is well known, the end result of this experiment was the death of the subjects. This experiment is absolutely revealing for the way in which the Occident situated the body outside the sphere of communication. For it is almost impossible for these children not to have interacted with their caretakers, not to have gesticulated, howled or expressed their happiness or sadness. Five centuries after Friedrich's experiment, the story of a miracle with an opposite meaning might have constituted a privileged occasion for making acceptable the presence and importance of the body in the sphere of human communication. Of course, we are thinking about the story of Hellen Keller

who, blind and deaf by birth, still manages to learn to communicate with others and write poetry in English.

But not even when man's non-verbal communication abilities have been scientifically founded by Charles Darwin in 1872 through the observation of the identity of the fundamental facial expressions – joy, sadness, anger, etc. – between different races and their similitude with those of certain superior primates, communication has not been related to the body. While the universality of emotional expressivity and the innate character of this type of communication should have drawn our attention upon the preeminence of non-verbal over verbal communication and to transform the body in a subject of communication.

Modernity has continued to endow the soul or the consciousness with the attribute of communication by considering it essentially verbal up until Freudian psychoanalysis, at the beginning of the 20th

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has brought along a shift in perception with which the relationship between body and soul just as the theoretical representation of the body and the importance of the latter for communication have changed dramatically. This shift brought about by psychoanalysis transforms the body in a body of language. Freud observes that hysterical paralysis appears not according to the nervous system but to the description of the body in words (Freud, 1950). When Freud analyzed the atypical paralysis peculiar to hysteria (Freud, 1972) he observed that they appear through projection or representation and ignore the actual anatomy of the nervous system. It is as if the lesion does not affect the trajectories of the nerves but the words denoting different parts of the body: paralysis appears without nervous lesions but according to the common words denoting different parts of the body.

This means that in hysterical paralysis the body is homogenous with language, is symbolic, not anatomical. In such cases the „thinking” of the body is guided by reasons such as that of Freud’s patient Elisabeth von R.: „This cannot go like that.” who does not utter it in language, represses it as idea, and paralyzes according to the meaning of the words. Here we are faced with a body which speaks in its own way, which, through its movements overpasses conscious repression and holds the discourse of the unconscious.

But this relationship between the body and language expresses itself at the same time through dreams and different modifications at the level of speaking: bungled actions, metaphors or metonymies, etc. Due to the fact that, essentially, psychoanalytical cure is a spoken cure, it privileges what the patient can say, his verbal discourse, leaving in a way aside his

gestures and body language as such. Thus, even though Freud has discovered the signifying capacity of the body he still believed that the verbal cure is the most significant, leaving body language at the periphery of the sphere of communication. Such a solution underexposes the Freudian idea of the body of language and renders ungraspable the idea of body as language related to the expression of the unconscious through motility and pantomime. This is because in Freud the opposition between the psychic and the biological organism maintains the metaphysical attitude of Western thought, identifiable also in Saussure who distinguishes the signifier and the signified as idea of consciousness and respectively voice of the body.

It is true up until the beginning of the 20th century Western thought has been governed by the hierarchized metaphysical dualism of soul and body through which the body was excluded not only from communication but also from the sphere of culture in general. The body has been religiously and philosophically devalued and kept at bay through discipline and will, through the stringency of ritual – starting with the religious ones which see the body as the signifier as such and ending with those of politeness – and through the aesthetical idealization of its artistic representation. Moreover, for a long period of time, it has been considered even the adversary par excellence in our Christian-Platonic Western culture. The metaphysical consequence, apparent in Greek thought and imported into Christianity despite its Jewish background – is the asymmetrical relationship between body and soul: the body is but a container for the soul incomparably much more valuable. Christianity is par excellence a religion of the embodied God, of a God

which incarnates as man. Such a representation, with all its extraordinary spiritually human potential, illustrates the Orphic-Platonic idea of a superior soul which comes to inhabit a body that, as container is essentially inferior. Christianity took from Judaism the idea of the resurrection of the bodies at the end of times, an idea inconceivable for the Greeks although, at the same time, the body was denigrated. And, the whole Western philosophy has followed Christianity on this lead: against practice and reality, philosophy excluded the body from the field of communication.

But in the second half of the 20th century the body came to be omnipresent in our civilization's practices and discourses. Now more than ever and apparently out of the sudden the body is perceived, theoretically and practically, as the *signus* and the means of numerous signifying systems: the expressiveness of the voice, gestures, behaviors or, from another perspective, cosmetics, clothes, signs of social status, of institutionalized relations, of politeness and etiquette, of feelings and attitudes, related to roles and social positions, signs of arts or of its own vitality. This generalized inversion of the asymmetrical relationship between body and soul, customary for the Western world – for the profit of the body, along with the corporeism of our days determines the body to enter the scene of communication and imposes the idea of body as language.

This is why an explanation of the miraculous story of Hellen Keller could be formulated only now within the paradigm of postmodern corporeism which, at the same time, does not accept an essentialist perspective upon the body but regards it in its becoming. Thus, in the terms of Thomas Sebeok's semiotics the exchanges

between the mother and the child of substances and energy before the birth take place as a biological communication (2003: 14). This communication continues after the birth through direct interaction between the body of the mother and that of the child in the whole sphere of maternal relations. Anyhow, pupils are educated firstly through gestures and only after that through words. The bodily interaction between the mother and the child appears as the main form of communication and institutes itself as the basis upon which other forms of communication are elaborated. At the beginning of human existence there is a primordially of gestures over verbal language for the relation is in this case anterior not only to the content of communication but to verbal communication as well. Thus, the explanation of the miracle is that, as in the case of mother-child relationship, Hellen Keller has learned body language through physical interaction with her tutor. The mother-child interaction becomes in this way the basis for communication as such, including verbal communication. In the context of this relationship the individuation of language and its individual incorporation as well as the collectivization of the body, through learning a language that belongs to all, takes place.

Society subjects bodily interaction to a strict codification, to a ritualisation which tends to transform the body into a semiological entity by transforming it into a signifier intermingled within a system of communication and exchange (advertising, commercials, music videos, etc.). Cultures go as far as to exchange the meanings of the gestures with completely new ones. Thus Freud considered the gesture of nodding to be the search of the infant for his or hers mother's breast. Upon this primordial corporeal relation-

ship, society constructs its meanings and significations. The cultural over determination of gestures overturns gestural meanings; in the case of the Turk and Bulgarian culture nodding expresses negation.

But the situation has never been the same all the time. At the level of anthropogenesis it is to be presupposed a pre-eminence of body language over verbal language, which could offer us some hints and explanations for the apparition and evolution of verbal language. The upright posture anchored this relation: by freeing, as Leroi-Gourhan observes (1964-65), the phonic apparatus, it has freed the hands for gesturing as well. The spreading of verbal language has resulted in the reduction of the communicative utility of gestures, mimic and ritualized behaviors in general. And the evolution of man, especially in the Western modern world, has imposed a strong normatively and a tight censure upon the body and spontaneous expression. In this context, verbal language has gained in front of body language and linguistics has gained the possibility to explain many gestures following the codification of the gestures of the body.

Now, in a civilization that overrates the body and body language in general, the realm of gestures come to be separated and basically situated at the same level with language. The use of the gestures is not that dependent on language, as it was the case in Modernity, and gestures are usually considered just as important as words for the representation of meaning. In our times the body ceased to be a sub-product when compared to language, or a primitive form of expression and is used along with it and can serve it as complement in communication rendering possible new signifying structures. Thus,

touches – from those who are meant to attract our attention taking the place of the words, to caressing and massage – introduce a type of gestures which, ever since the deciphering of Hellen Keller's enigma, bring to the attention of the Western world an entire domain of the sensuous completely ignored. The eye and the ear, essentially social senses, are as well senses of the soul, and texts are the product of a mixture between the eye and the ear.

Or, with this idea of body as language, with the eye and the ear along the newly (re)discovered senses of smell and taste, a new sense enters the scene of communication – tactility with its organ, the skin. Skin has the same embryonic origin as the other sense organs and the nervous system: all come from the ectoderm, the third embryonic layer and the most spread and rich in receptors of our sense organs. "After the brain", said Ashley Montagu, "the skin is undoubtedly the most important of our organs... A being can live blind, without taste or smell but cannot survive a moment without skin." (Gérard Leleu, 2005: 18). The skin, this sense organ long time overlooked in Western culture, is par excellence the sense of the body, the only sense that produces a double sensation, active and passive at the same time, interior and exterior which gives the mind the possibility to represent its body. The body is truly the ego-skin as Didier Anzieu notes following Freud.

Such a structural transformation of the spheres pertaining to culture can offer us the measure of the change in Western civilization once with the presence of the body in communication. In its distinction from verbal language, which represents the content, the digital, the unmotivated, arbitrary signs, body language represents

the relation the analogical, the motivated. Most often the image of the body constitutes a basis for a face to face relationship: starting from it the other forms his or hers impressions and passes judgments upon us. The glance or the mimic, and sometimes gestures and even howls, represent the *phatic* function, they open the canal that renders communication possible. And the body language of the sender has most often a more direct influence upon the receiver than verbal discourse.

Thus, such signifying intentions or signifying systems, located in the body or passing through it can express better than verbal language the reactions of the subject; they can impress the co-speaker in various ways and propose or impose a relationship. They can regulate such a relation, engage the symbolism of a ritual or, finally, play a linguistic role by sustaining verbal language (but, in this case too by privileging the relation). If we differentiate the functions of the communicative relation according to Watzlawick's (1972: 238-252) distinction between relation and content we observe that the communicative functions that can be realized by the body are those pertaining to relation. In body language the *phatic* function is essential. Even in hysteria – paralysis, cecity deafness – somatization has the function to establish a contact, that is it engages a relation where it was missing. Thus the truth of the well-known idea that most often verbal language transmits information whereas body language expresses the interpersonal attitude which, in connection with the content of communication, functions as meta-communication.

In order to offer a diagnostic of the changes produced by the body for the sphere of communication it is necessary to bring to light the communicative functions that cannot pertain to body lan-

guage. The first of these would be the metalinguistic one highly disputed among the specialists. Of course, one can explain a gesture through another and generally attitudes serve as metacode for gestures – we can determine that a gesture is obscene only from the attitude of the person gesticulating. Thus the metalinguistic function can be viewed as a borderline between body and verbal language: the body can show amazement but cannot ask questions, only consciousness can. The primates can learn to sign but cannot pose questions. The metalinguistic functions is closely related to language and so peculiar to man. Here the digital aspect of verbal language gets strictly differentiated from the analogic one pertaining to the body and is superior to it.

If we want at any cost to make the body the hero in the battle with the soul, as some authors do, we could say that, against the plural meanings and senses the body was forced to embody, it has raised the opacity of its own materiality and constantly hijacked transcendence towards immanence transforming spectacle in spectacular. But human body, which differs from the biological organism, can be thought only along with its existence, with its everyday life. The body enters the sphere of communication only because it has become language just like the soul centuries ago and not due to its biological reality. And the one that proposes the signifying systems, which imposes the „speaking” of certain languages is society. The problem is why is this happening now, why are we now interested in the meanings of the body, and haven't been earlier?

Probably the best answer to this question can be offered by another function of the body in communication – the poetic function. At the same time with the

desacralization of the world the body, freed from the task of representing other exterior symbols, has gained constantly a poetic function through its presentation in mass media of the Western world. The poetic function describes the numerous situations in which the body becomes a self-referential object, that is becomes a poem: make-up art, perfumes and lotions, body painting or dance. The body becomes an artifact as well in the plastic surgeries undertaken by Orlan or in the performance of Stelart and other experiments of this type. Of course, in this aesthetical self-representation nothing else happens than the fact that the *phatic* function takes the body as its starting point and thus communication communicates the body not the soul. Which means that here, in Baudrillard's terms, we are facing a signifier which signifies itself, a *simulacra*.

The presence of the body in the public space and the interest for communication as constitution of a relation and not as transmission of informations is the consequence of a profound sacralisation of life in ethics, politics and law. The sacred „principle” of life seems to be strained through the plurality of the bodies to be reversed in its nudity, stripped of determinations, meaning metaphysical, on the scene of public space. Anyhow, its key players remain the bodies. Communication as relation is a celebration of pure vitality, the vitality of naked life, of life without determinations. The spectators appreciate the communicative force more than the arguments and the content of communication. The triumph of the body in the sphere of public space is the triumph of the analogical (image) over the digital (text), of imagology over ideology, in short the triumph of ostensive ideology.

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