

WORDS AS COMMONS AND AS SYMBOL ¹

What happens when we speak of something which concerns *everybody* in words which only *the few* can understand?

What happens is that the person who uses words in this way is actually saying that the subject under discussion is “not for everyone”, that it is “something only a chosen few can understand” and the underlying message is that he, in speaking of this matter, is in fact one of those *few*; what happens then is that those *few people* “take over” that subject, even though they uphold the idea that it is – or should be – something that concerns *everyone*; what really happens is that despite the declared intention, *everyone* is dispossessed of a subject matter that concerns them – to the sole advantage of the chosen *few*.

Perhaps this thought is expressed in too a complicated way and so as not to fall into the very error I am talking about, I should give an example of what I mean.

There are *many* subjects that concern *a lot* of people, but *some* subjects concern *everyone*. In particular, by definition, the *human condition* concerns us *all*. And when I speak of the human condition, I mean – the example par excellence – the uncertainty and suffering which comes from our experiences around abandonment, illness, old age and death that, bar the short-cut of death itself, we are all destined to meet in the course of our lives. Yet it is not easy to find someone writing in depth about these matters in a form accessible to absolutely anyone with basic literacy skills, writing in such a way that any reader can easily understand what is being said and perhaps also thereby feel encouraged to express themselves.

¹ On print in *Mediterranea Wratislaviensia*, next number, Wrocław 2013.

The idea that *everyone* should be able to understand matters which concern us *all*, that everyone should be able to understand something that has to do with him or her is really about respect and participation; some might add that it is about “democracy”.

When I come across texts which are obscure, hermetic, mysterious as riddles, or merely involved, needlessly complex and full of innuendo, I feel uneasy, irritated even. I wonder if they are the result of the author’s lack of confidence in his own writing skills or whether they come from a kind of self-satisfied narcissism and, I might add, a lack of respect for the reader. There are those who write in this way because it makes them feel highbrow, one of the elect, although s/he is perhaps only confused and in danger of becoming more so: some claim that the language one uses affects one’s thinking and that normally one can only think what one is able to say^[1]. It is true that there are people who express themselves carelessly or in bad faith but there are some who are seduced by complexity and others who try to compress their thoughts into too little space. Then, there are texts that have been translated badly into another language, and are thus beyond the control of their author.

Clarity of speech by its very nature casts light on what is shadowy; enlightens the listener, reveals that which is obscure, opens windows and lets in the light. Speech which is opaque throws shadows on its subject-matter; it complicates things which are simple and leads the listener into a fog. We should make an effort to speak clearly and simply about any truth which is important partly because the truth of things lies in their inner light (and the nature of light is clarity, not obscurity) and partly because everyone should have access to the important truths of life for the very reason that they concern everybody. Of course we know that some things cannot be spoken of and that sometimes words are not enough to express what we feel or what we would like to say, but the fact that some things cannot be put into words must not become an excuse for confused or woolly thinking.

There is a widespread misconception according to which some people hold that difficult subjects, those requiring lengthy reflection and study, although of concern to everyone, cannot be put into simple language. It is as if the use of long, incomprehensible words and complicated formats were in themselves some kind of guarantee of serious thought. Let's turn this idea on its head: *the reason* for requiring simplicity of expression is not only because of the moral duty towards the listener or reader, but is – and I am thinking here of those “difficult” subjects – connected to the intimate and essential nature of things, the deep root of things (in philosophical language we would say this is the “ontological” reason). And this reason is – and I am in good company here with a long tradition stretching from Parmenides by way of Occam all the way to Gandhi – that simplicity brings us close to complex truths and in fact we could go so far as to state that simplicity is the true path to an understanding of complexity. But *simple* does not mean *easy*.

Simple and *complex* have to do with the nature of something, they are a quality; *easy* and *difficult* have to do with doing something or relating to something.

This is why it is not a contradiction – in fact, it is quite reasonable – to say that whereas it is difficult to speak simply, anyone with a rich vocabulary and a desire not to be understood (or anyone with a confused mind), finds it easy to speak in flowery language and use words as a smokescreen behind which to hide himself and his subject-matter.

These are common tricks: diplomats and politicians, salesmen and popular agitators are usually experts at them, as are those who confuse entertainment with culture. There are several different conjuring tricks:

- the use of different words as if they were synonymous; but *there is no such thing* as a synonym: every single word has its own meaning and nuance which derives from its original root, its development over time, its usage; not even words that have been translated are synonyms: the English word

Sun names something smaller and colder than the Neapolitan *o'Sole*;

- reference to chains of mirrored relationships up to the fourth item (Frank is thinking of Mary who's thinking of Frank who's thinking of Mary who's thinking of Frank" and we are all lost!) Once we get to the fourth item, the speaker is on his own;
- the use of random and confusing language in which abstract and adjectival nouns are mixed and matched in interminable sentences which can be prolonged ad infinitum^[2]. And here we really recognise the patterns of empty speech heard over the last few decades in the public arena, poisoning communication, coming especially from politicians – though here we have noticed that circuitous and meaningless political oratory has been overtaken by more aggressive verbal abuse based on deliberate, offensive slander. Between 2009 and 2010, two publications appeared – *Politichese per tutti*^[3] and *Politichese*^[4] (“Politicalspeak for Everyman” and “Politicalspeak”) – addressed, tongue in cheek, to aspiring cabinet ministers and prime ministers, and aimed at the construction of speeches which allow one to *make any kind of statement on any subject at all without actually saying anything* and which help generate sentences like the following:

A structured approach, in the direct interests of the population, pertaining to multiple areas of skill, represents the challenge awaiting us in Europe, ultimately setting in motion, when the time is ripe and thus allows such a process to take place, the challenge set by the new millennium...

The text allows for the composition of this and a further 268 million different combinations of phrases with wide application and no meaning whatsoever.

One could add others to this short list of verbal tricks, as for example sliding the subject of the sentence along from phrase to phrase; the use of double negatives (*I would not like you not to*

be aware...); the generation of chains of subordinate clauses inside the same sentence...

When we have to go back to the beginning of a sentence and re-read it because, after crawling through endless subordinate clauses, we have mislaid the subject or lost the meaning we thought we had grasped, then we may feel that it is our fault: we weren't listening properly or perhaps we just don't know enough about the matter. Or more probably – we are in the presence of an author whose use of language is complicated and confused either because he really doesn't know what he is talking about or because the subject matter is so confused in his mind that it cannot be expressed properly. This is almost certainly a case of someone who, rather than wishing to communicate, wishes to show off his learning by appearing to write about something that he implies is almost impossible either to put into words or to understand.

WORDS FOR SPECIALISTS

I have sometimes heard it said that not everyone should have access to certain subjects: my reply to this vague statement is a likewise vague “perhaps...” But I am not talking here about every imaginable subject, nor am I suggesting that it is a good idea to broadcast a recipe for building an atom bomb in your kitchen. I am talking here about those matters which are the business of the people and by this I mean that everybody (whether they belong to a family, to a community or to humanity as a whole) should be able to understand those matters which affect him or her. However hard to understand something which pertains to the common weald may be, there must be a simple way to render it accessible to those involved, otherwise we are blocking access to someone who is directly affected by the matter in hand and this is a form of expropriation, or “clearance”. This is a specific aspect of the same process of expropriation of skills and knowledge that is set in motion by the cult of specialization which forbids access to anyone who is not an expert.

So looking at the common skills which have nowadays become the province of experts, we could say the same thing: today nobody can be born without a midwife and a neonatology professional, nobody can be raised without a paediatrician and an educator, since clearly a mother and father are no longer sufficient, and nobody can die without the assent of a doctor and perhaps soon we will need to consult a death expert as well. So, in the light of the ongoing institutionalisation of services, we could say that despite the growing number of human rights we are supposed to enjoy, we are all in effect labelled as needy and incapable^[5].

Those matters that concern us all: the life cycles, the forms of the world, health, collective choices, the use of resources, wellbeing and misery, beauty and ugliness, peace and uproar...are “commons” that is to say, common *places* and *goods* intrinsically accessible and useable by everyone, not open to removal or appropriation. And the commons, since they pertain to the subsistence of the community and the individual, belong to a pre-juridical dimension which precedes and is itself the source of all law, because a law which denies the right to subsistence is, or should be, unthinkable and is in fact a contradiction in terms^[6].

COMMONS

Throughout the modern age, the commons were - and continue to be - “hunting grounds” for the predatory part of humanity, and the last few centuries of European history and the last few decades of world history have seen an ongoing process of elimination and appropriation of common spaces and collective resources^[7]. The erosion of the commons is the birthplace of the social construction of poverty, as narrated by *Das Kapital* and its successors, tracing the history of original accumulation^[8]. This was one of the processes marking the passage between the 16th and 17th centuries, with the Enclosures and the forced expropriation, first on an individual level and then through legislation, of communal arable land for use as pasture by large

land-owners. This historical process happened at the same time as the transformation of science from a unitary expression of knowledge shaped by tradition and based on experience into an increasingly fragmented array of many specialized areas, characterized by innovation, confined to the laboratory and based on explaining life through repeatable experiment (although in reality, nothing is really repeatable). This extreme specialization of knowledge and its confinement in the laboratory can be read as an example of Enclosure. All this occurred at the same time as the emergence of the heliocentric model of the cosmos, a model which was no longer based on direct observation and the evidence of the senses as was the geocentric model, where reality was perceived to coincide with what could be observed by anyone. The acceptance of this model, in which the cosmos was conceived as no longer directly observable, can also be read as an example of Enclosure.

The enclosure of the commons in Elizabethan England led to the expulsion from the land of huge numbers of peasants who flooded into the towns and ended up as beggars whose final destination was often prison, the gallows, or the workhouse (which was not a charitable hospice but a place of forced labour, foreshadowing both the concentration camp and the factory). In the same way, one may observe how the expulsion of ordinary people from all discussion of matters of common interest which is the result of the increasing specialization in all areas of knowledge and all aspects of social intercourse, produces a similar form of marginalisation. In some countries, this marginalisation is masked by a demagogic veneer - a pretense of participatory “democracy” which however only means the *appearance* of choice since the vote simply means delegation of power to a party and this delegation of power is nowadays overwhelmingly manipulated by the media.

Words are commons, common and communal wealth, just like, for example, natural resources, the environment, peace and silence.

To steal them means carrying out an act of expropriation. To cut oneself off from common humanity is really to cut

ourselves off from our own self since we are all inextricably part of humanity.

DENIAL OF COMMON SENSE

Extreme specialization denies the validity of our common sense and legitimizes the superiority of specialist jargon over ordinary, everyday language where things are never too removed from the way they appear. Pavel Florenskij had a very clear position on this and his stance threatens most of the metaphysical castles in the air which constitute the academic history of thought.

The awareness of the ordinary man confirms to me that things are as they appear to be; most of those who deal in philosophy and science try as hard as they can to show that “appearance” is an empty and deceptive concept: things are not as they seem. It is certainly not a matter of indifference to me whether I think and feel as does the rest of humanity or whether I go along with those who are inclined to deny things, inclined to heresy on what is common to all men, to isolated inner circles and elite thought^[9].

The kind of learning that has shattered the unity of knowledge into separate disciplines and hyper-specializations has the effect of separating those who do not belong to the inner circle by putting up linguistic fences to exclude them from understanding those things that have become the monopoly of the in group. And it is when the knowledge deals with matters which concern everyone that the consequences we have described come into play: when there is a violent and exclusive appropriation of the knowledge in question, the result is the expropriation of those who would have had the natural right to it.

I do not want to be misunderstood here: it can be useful and indeed helpful to use jargon - exclusive, inside terminology - when we are talking about microprocessors or share investments or vascular surgery, but not when we are talking

about bio-ethics or the over-use of non-renewable resources or genetic engineering in agriculture. We could put it like this: nobody should allow themselves to talk about issues which are important for someone else in such a way that the person concerned is unable to understand what is said and is therefore excluded from the discussion: this kind of talk is profoundly lacking in legitimacy and the speaker would do better to remain silent. If I am talking about *techniques for the construction* of pace-makers with the person who actually does this work, it is acceptable for me to use specialist terminology in that context, although even here there is no justification for an obscure or abstruse manner of speaking. But if I am talking about the *use* of a pace-maker, no matter who my listeners are, I must speak in a manner which is comprehensible to anyone who uses, or might use, the device. To talk about something which is of *general* interest, importance or concern in specialist jargon implies a denial of the general nature of the subject and shows a lack of awareness of that general nature or else an arrogant disregard for others, an attitude we might legitimately label anti-democratic.

We could find many examples of this kind. One area that comes to mind is the law, and the law, by definition, has to do with every citizen: but most citizens are unable to reach any clear understanding of the norms by which they are bound. Perhaps the heavy, long-winded language in which these laws are couched is a symptom of the lack of familiarity with the written language on the part of juridical experts. Certainly the language serves their corporate interests, since ordinary people cannot easily find their way through the legal maze without their help and certainly it is a practice which works against the common man, removing control, as it does, from him or her in a matter which is the business of all citizens. Once again we have an example of expropriation. When a rule of law is not clearly understood by those at whom it is directed or when it is expressed in an ambiguous way so that more than one interpretation of its meaning is possible, it ought to be considered inefficacious and that ought to be enough to justify its repeal.

I repeat that matters concerning everyone should be expressed in a clear and simple manner, in a manner that I would like to call “commonplace”, not wordy or lacking in respect for the intelligence of the listener as if one were speaking to a child. It is perfectly possible to use a basic vocabulary^[10] with a limited use of unusual words so that nobody is made to feel inadequate or left out in a matter which concerns him or her in everyday life, and this can be done without trivializing or lowering the level of the content! And I consider this to be a good practice for the writer; but I would like to suggest a practice for the reader too: if you do not understand a particular sentence, unless you have good reasons for thinking it worth re-reading (perhaps out of respect for the author or for another reader who found it significant), the sentence deserves to be removed or ignored. If the whole book is hard to understand, and you are not in need of a book to put under a wobbly table-leg, then you can quietly get rid of it!

I am not trying to encourage anyone to dumb down the language or lower the level of communication: that is the black art of the demagogue who uses this technique deliberately, but I do want to encourage everyone to remove whatever is superfluous and ostentatious or obscure and ambiguous from the spoken and written word because these are the characteristics which make for listener/reader-unfriendly communication and tend to make people feel left out.

Words cannot be used lightly, they must be used responsibly, because everything that limits understanding leads to expropriation and social exclusion; and this is where our reasoning leads, it leads us back to where we began and we could consider that everything has been said. But I would like to be allowed to set sail one more time and see where the drift of my reflections brings me after what has been said so far.

THE MARTIAL ART OF THE WORD

There is another reason why words should not be used lightly and it has to do with the long history of thought, where in

various shapes and forms, many different ideas have flourished about the word. Most of these derive from two main positions. Some have seen the word as a neutral vehicle, a conventional sound or sign, mere packaging: this position, known as nominalism, is the one which has found most favour with modern and contemporary thought. There are, on the other hand, those who find in the word a manifestation of the thing signified, to the point of identifying the word with the reality it announces^[11]. This position belongs to the wisdom tradition and is identical to that which, according to ethnographic accounts, is found in the living cultures of many native peoples, traces of which we also see in the belief systems which survive today in rural Europe.

In this vision, the burden of responsibility called into play in the use of the word is not only a social but *also* a metaphysical one, because to manipulate words is to manipulate reality itself and it thus requires enormous care and precision, as is the case, (or should be) in the liturgy and in healing or initiation ceremonies. The word in these contexts is not neutral, it is not just a sound or a vehicle for content, but a substantial and dynamic manifestation of reality. Its value is at once *magical*, because it allows us to act upon the world, and *mystical*, because it is in itself the thing signified^[12]. Here we find the explanation for the power of incantation, of command and of invocation, and this is why – according to those who uphold this view – the word can cause illness, heal, bless or curse, create or destroy, invoke worlds or generate them, as all the wisdom and mythological traditions of humanity confirm.

But words also have a *symbolic* value, in the triple sense shown by the deep significance of the term (deriving from the Greek *syn-ballein*, “to join together”): they create union between the worlds, union with the things of this world and union between people.

The holy word unites the visible and the invisible worlds, so that they are both present at once; like all sacred sound – in the form of prayer, music, song, the chiming of bells – the word rises and unites earth with heaven just as the uncreated light shines without setting and unites heaven and earth.

The second symbolic sense of the word is about union with the world: this is very hard for our culture to understand although this would not be the case for most indigenous cultures^[13]. We do not understand speech directed at animate and inanimate things but above all we do not understand their reply to us when we address them in song, music, or with a calling, a blessing, a word.

And the word is symbolic in a third sense because it unites people, it bridges the distance between them, brings them into contact, so that two or more than two become as one. When removed from its symbolic nature which unites and makes present together, the word loses its ontological dimension, it becomes degraded, mere noise, mere organic burble, an instinctive movement on the part of someone who sees without perceiving and listens without hearing. And what is the consequence of all this? The consequence is that, out of respect for the order of things, when we talk we should communicate, we should (and must) make our listener understand, or at least we must try as far as is possible given the specific capacities of the listener. If we speak with the intention of not being understood, if we make something simple sound difficult (or something difficult sound trivial), if we speak in abstract instead of concrete terms, if we use words to widen the gap, to make ourselves look big, or to put others down, instead of using them to share and communicate with others, we are going against the deep, ontological nature of the word, using it to separate instead of unite, rendering diabolic (from the Greek *dia-ballein*, “interpose”, “put between”, “separate”: the opposite of *syn-ballein*!) something which is symbolic, and distancing ourselves from the rest of humanity (and from our own selves, who cannot really be separated from humanity), we cut our selves off, and fall into heresy towards the canon common to humanity, shared by humanity as a whole^[14].

Marius Schneider, after affirming that

the biblical phrase “In the beginning was the Word” is not the product of an advanced culture, but comes from a conceptual heritage

more archaic than humanity itself. Even the Uitoto, who live wild in the virgin forests of South America have a tradition which says “In the beginning the Word brought forth the Father”^[15].

takes one step further and suggests that the word comes from the primordial sound, or perhaps vibration, which gave birth to everything; all song and all music, all noise and all words are just an echo of that sound, an echo that is all the more powerful the closer it comes to repeating the archetype.

Whether or not one agrees with this position, which may appear anachronistic, the word, either because of what it signals or because of its own nature, is as powerful as a weapon and, like a weapon, should be used with awareness and caution. I will go further and say that we should treat our use of words as a practice in the same way that we practise a martial art, that is to say, with concentration, self-control, discipline and by means of careful exercise^[16] and personal effort, perhaps even regarding it as a rite. The mindfulness which can be cultivated by anyone in the carrying out of each daily act, even things like walking or washing up, needs to be applied to our use of words^[17]. Treating the use of words just as we would the practice of a martial art may be a way of containing their great power and keeping a check on our tendency to speak without thinking: it may help us render our words easy on the ear of the listener or reader and make them full of significance.

But the practice of a martial art requires a sense of restraint, I might even say chastity, which, in the case of words means a sense of measure and a love of silence. The wisdom scriptures remind us of the weightiness of the word as often as they evoke awareness of its power and holiness: in the Biblical commandments it is respect for the weightiness of the word that forbids us to take the Name of the Lord in vain or to bear false witness. The gospel warns us: «*But let your communication be: Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil*»^[18]. As regards silence, I observe that our time is profoundly influenced by the tempo of television, which eschews any break or time for reflection or the time required for people to listen to each other; this makes for continuous sound

or noise, rather like the inside of a disco, where the mixer ensures that the music never stops. This is the same kind of noise effect we get from someone who talks on and on, piling up endless interjections and drawing out vowel sounds and long nasal tones.

In our time, when we talk more than our knowledge warrants and underestimate the communicative power of silence, we should try to say fewer words than could be said. It would be rather like the practice of fasting, or like rising from the table before we are completely full so as to preserve the health of the body.

We (writers) have a duty, as long as we live: we have to answer for what we write, for each and every word, and we have to make sure that each word hits the mark. After all, speaking to others in language which they cannot understand may be the vice of certain revolutionaries, but it is absolutely not a revolutionary tool: on the contrary, it is one of the oldest devices of repression, used by all churches and a vice typical of our political classes, as well as the foundation of all colonial empires. It is a subtle way to impose superiority of rank(...) As long as we live, and whatever fate may send us or destiny we may choose, there is no doubt that we shall be all the more useful and pleasing to other people and to ourselves, and longer remembered, if our communication is as good as we can make it. The person who does not know how to communicate, or who does so badly, using a private code known only to a few, is unhappy and spreads unhappiness around him or her. If they communicate badly deliberately they are wicked or at least rude, because they force their listeners to suffer fatigue, anguish or boredom^[19].

footnotes

This text updates some reflections of mine already presented in previous articles: *La recinzione degli spazi comuni della parola* [The fencing of the common spaces of the word], «Anthropos e Iatria», XIV (2010), 3: 65-71, and *Alle radici della parola cultura* [Down to the roots of the word culture], «Montesquieu.it», 2012.

1. Alexander R. Lurija talks about this in *Ob istoričeskom razvitii poznavatel'nyh processov* (1974)
2. In 1971 Elémire Zolla claimed there exists a sacred “occult text” which gives birth to and shapes contemporary rhetoric with these methods (*Che cos'è la Tradizione*, Milano 1971:12).
3. <http://itunes.apple.com/it/app/politichese-per-tutti/id311930194?mt>
4. <http://www.verbumweb.net/politichese.php>
5. Ivan Illich, *Gender* (1982), used ed. Milano 1984: 88 «Modern societies boast of their capacity to pauperize most of their citizens by labelling them the beneficiaries of services they are no longer able to provide for themselves»..
6. The pre-juridical value of those things pertaining to subsistence and common goods was the focus of a recent reflection of mine: *Scambio dei semi e diritto originario* [Seeds exchange and primary right], in *La società dei beni comuni. Una rassegna*, ed. by Paolo Cacciari, Milano 2010: 103-109.
7. There is a huge literature on the subject of the privatisation of communal resources. For a general picture of the phenomenon on a worldwide scale, re-examined in the latter half of the last century by Garrett Hardin (*The Tragedy of the Commons*, «Science», 1968, CLXII, 3859: 1243-1248), see the article review published in *The Questions of the Commons. The Culture of Ecology of Communal Resources*, ed. by Bonnie McCay and James M. Acheson, The University of Arizona Press 1987.
8. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (1867), used ed. Milano 1989: I, 780 and foll. pages.
9. Pavel A. Florenskij, *La venerazione del nome*, in *Il valore magico della parola*, ed. by Graziano Lingua, Milano 2003: 22.
10. There is a very good example of basic vocabulary in the *Dizionario di base della Lingua Italiana* (DIB) ed. Tullio De Mauro and Giuseppe Moroni, Torino 1996.

11. A good example of this is the dispute which arose within the Orthodox Church in 1912 which ended with the condemnation of the monks of Mount Athos who claimed to experience the essence of God simply through pronouncing his Name.
12. Florenskij, *La venerazione*, cit.:51 and foll. pages.
13. See Freya Mathews, *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture*, Albany 2005.
14. The relationship between the canon and heresy as well as reflections on the ontological dimension of the symbol are amply dealt with in Florenskij, *Ikonostas* (1919-1922).
15. Marius Schneider, *Die historischen Grundlagen der musikalischen Symbolik* (1951), used ed. Milano 2007:14.
16. Exercise is the meaning of the Greek word *askēsis* from which we get Italian *ascesi* (mystical exaltation).
17. On the art of everyday acts and the mindfulness which makes each act a rite, see the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, particularly his *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (1975).
18. St. Matthew, V, 37.
19. Primo Levi, *Dello scrivere oscuro*, in P.L., *L'altrui mestiere*, Torino 2006: 55. I thank my friend, the novelist Alessandro Marengo, for this quotation.