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26. ON THE SEMIOTIC FUNCTIONS OF SILENCE

O funkcjach semiotycznych milczenia

(Dąmbska 1971g)

Language in its many pragmatic functions is an important tool with which people may fulfill their various aspirations and plans, especially those which occur on the basis of their coexistence with other living creatures. Thus, language may be analyzed as a tool to objectivize the results of cognition, as a tool to create information, of communicating with others and directing their behavior, as a tool to express one’s own inner states, as well as a means of creating certain cultural objects which have meaning (works of art, science, law, forms of religion, etc.). After all, when we use language signs in the proper manner, that is, determined by linguistic directives and by situations which we find ourselves in, we may attain various objectives within the scope of the mentioned activities. However we may, and sometimes should, abstract this operational aspect of language in order to research its formal and structural properties, that is, its logical syntax, or to research only its reference to the objective domain which it maps, and therefore, research its semantic properties. However, whenever we are faced with the question of what the semiotic functions of silence are, we should analyze silence as a certain phenomenon of human existence in the world which is, although it sounds like a paradox, connected with speech and with language in its many instrumental functions. This does not mean that silence is merely a not-speaking. Undoubtedly this is also a meaning of the word “silence.” A single guard on a tower, a listener at a lecture, a person sleeping, or a deaf-mute remain silent in this sense. Silence understood in the above way is a certain negative state of affairs: the lack of external speech, and more broadly: a certain form of quietness. Still, we may also speak of silence in the cases where the lack of external speech is the result of refraining from speaking. This act of refraining from
speaking may be intentional as a means of action (remaining silent in a certain matter in order to keep it secret) or it may be the result of certain external conditions (e.g. refraining from speaking when the regulations require it), or it may be caused by a certain inner state (when someone falls silent as a result of shyness or anger), etc. However, such not-speaking always differs from subconscious not-speaking and even from conscious not-speaking which is not accompanied with this moment of characteristic hesitation, significant for silence in the narrower meaning.\(^1\) This silence as refraining from speaking has two aspects: substantial and functional. In the former, silence is refraining from talking about certain topics, whereas in the latter it is refraining from speaking as a certain function consisting in specific communication with others or communicating anything to them in this way. In the first case, we must distinguish refraining from talking about certain issues and keeping silent about certain issues and simultaneously talking about something else to conceal what we do not want to talk about.

In some cases, refraining from speaking reaches so deeply that it leads to the disappearance of something which may be called inner speech, that is, the disappearance of discursive thinking with the use of words and notions. This borderline case of silence seems to be sometimes postulated by intuitionists and mystics, who believe that any notional (verbal) cognition deforms the object given in direct experience. In *Enneads*, Plotinus describes the process of unifying the human soul with the absolute entity and writes that it is connected with “God present in silence” (“θεου αψοφητι παροντος”)\(^2\) and that it sees Him “free from any discourse” (“παντα λογον αjeeς”).\(^3\)

Wittgenstein repeats: “Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische.”\(^4\) An attempt to transfer this sort of experience or intuitions onto the language of notional discourse leads to the deformation

\(^1\) I proposed this understanding of the word “silence” in the essay entitled „Milczenie jako wyraz i wartość” [“Silence as an Expression and as a Value”] in 1952. The article was published eleven years later; cf. (Dąmbska 1963c). The present study is an attempt to expand and develop the semiotic section of this essay. The active character of silence is also noted by Max Scheler, who writes: “Personen können eben – schweigen und ihre Gedanken ver-schweigen. Und das ist [...] ein aktives Verhalten, durch das sie ihr Sosein verbergen können” (Scheler 1913, p. 259). Let us add that refraining from speaking is not understood as resisting the urge to speak; it may result from the need and desire not to speak.

\(^2\) Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* V. 8, 11.

\(^3\) Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* VI. 8, 19.

\(^4\) Cf. (Wittgenstein 1921, § 6. 522).