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Language and Negotiation in a New World of Challenges

Abstract: *The theme of negotiation in the field of International Studies is increasingly characterizing the current discussion on how to manage diversity and conflict in our age. Much diversity scholarship emphasizes how racial, ethnic, class, gender and sexual identities give rise to different ways of seeing the world. The article is an enquiry into the field of International Relations and Diplomacy as an interdisciplinary field dominated by Language, the central essence of the diplomatic vocation. The core of the study has been to gain insight into the various perspectives the field can be considered from in order to obtain a better understanding of the use of language in diplomacy. The research highlights some aspects of the language of international public relations, with reference to the different functions and a special attention to the concept of clarity/ambiguity as a language resource in complex or critical situations such as legal documents and peace treaties.*

Keywords: Economics of Language; Language and Negotiation; Language and Diplomacy.

*Al mio amato Maestro Antonio Donno
senza il quale non avrei iniziato a realizzare i miei sogni*

The theme of negotiation in the field of International Studies is increasingly characterizing the current discussion on how to manage diversity and conflict in our age. Much diversity scholarship emphasizes how racial, ethnic, class, gender and sexual identities give rise to different ways of seeing the world. The only alternative to a unifying vision that would imply a process of oppression, seems to be the creation and maintenance of much more limited and less ambitious areas of inter-subjective agreement by a process of negotiation between agents whose way of seeing the world is different.

1. *The Changing World*

The landscape in which international communication and diplomacy operate in the world has changed drastically, first, through the entry of multiple state entities into the diplomatic process in each country, and second by the entry of non-state actors into the

external relationships of each country.¹ In addition, the process of increasing “democratisation” has meant that there are many new players who do not know the old practices and style, using much more *open* language than before.

In our contemporary “post-traditional” society,² relationships and identities increasingly need to be negotiated through dialogue. Relationships based upon authority are in decline, and people’s self identity, rather than being a feature of given positions and roles, is reflectively built up through a process of negotiation. The openness implicit in dialogical communication involves greater possibilities than the fixed relationships and identities of traditional societies, but also greater risks. This demands greater care over how language is used, and greater sensitivity on how the participants in the dialogue are perceived.

There is an urgent necessity to know *the other, the other’s specific context*. Many misunderstandings and negotiating disappointments are due to a failure to understand the broader and specific context from which the opponent starts. Of course the stronger side has a tendency to make a negotiation easy for itself, just as President Clinton in 1993 informed the UN that the USA would act multilaterally when possible, but unilaterally when necessary.³

2. *Negotiating Language*

By definition, negotiation is an exercise in language and communication, aiming at shared understanding where, as it commonly happens, there are different understandings and, even worse, different languages and cultures.

Raymond Cohen’s *The Middle East Negotiating Lexicon*⁴ is a wonder dictionary of key negotiating words in Arabic, Farsi, Hebrew and Turkish. As the Author declares, it is intended as a reference facility for English-speaking observers and practioners of negotiation interested in clarifying language and resolving linguistic discrepancies. As a

¹ A fine survey of the changed context within which diplomacy functions today is to be found in B. HOCKING, *Foreign Ministries: Change & Adaptation*, London, Macmillian, 1999. There are also a few specific criticism publications on the subject.

² See A. GIDDENS, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991.

³ See N. CHOMSKY, *Rogue States*, Cambridge, MA, South End Press, 2000.

⁴ See R. COHEN, *The Middle East Negotiating Lexicon*, in J. KURBALIJA - H. SLAVIK, eds., *Language and Diplomacy*, Msida, Malta, University of Malta – DiploProjects publishing, 2001, pp. 67-69.

matter of fact the *Lexicon* is also a most lucid picture of the cultural gap between the eastern and western world, giving account of *what is lost in translation*.

Focusing on the meaning of negotiation in contemporary English, Cohen points out the wide range of a semantic field that includes bargaining, debate, and overcoming difficulties⁵ where compromise and concession are inseparable from negotiating. According to the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of negotiation it is the very process of give and take, compromise and mutual concession that legitimizes the outcome. On the contrary, neither Arabic, Farsi, nor Turkish possesses a special term for “compromise” even if there are other functional equivalents. In the middle eastern paradigm of negotiation «mutual sacrifice is not seen as something desirable in and of itself. Quite the reverse: who is enthusiastic about making a sacrifice? Thus an appeal to the Spirit of Compromise, as one might appeal to proof and justice, is literally meaningless in ME languages».⁶

3. *Language and Culture*

Globalisation is bringing together more and more people steeped in their own cultures and languages, all sharing complex economic, environmental and other technical issues. In many cases code-words summarize such issues, and phrases like “fair trade”, “social standards”, “sustainable development” are used to mean things that are often removed from the literal meaning of the words, or from their cultural contexts. Terms and words are often used irrationally and in violation of ethical precepts. They would need a sort of “resemiotization”, a process through which meaning is negotiated and reconstructed each time the context changes. This also explains the interactive nature of the discourse comprehension, insofar as textual, situational and cognitive resources are activated to derive meaning. World problems and events are interpreted in different ways, truths are

⁵ See J.A. SIMPSON - E.S.C. WEINER, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, vol. X-3.

⁶ COHEN, *The Middle East Negotiating Lexicon*, cit., p. 82. See also R. COHEN, *Negotiating Across Cultures: International Communication in an Interdependent World*, Washington, DC, United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997².

not self-evident and the increasingly negotiated nature of relationships demand highly developed dialogical capacities.⁷

Moreover, while a single vehicular language dominates as the medium of discourse and communication, the levels of language competence are very different. It is almost unavoidable that cultural and semantic divergences across peoples remain unexpressed or misinterpreted or misunderstood. While the Western Powers or hegemonic classes possess a deep critical awareness of words and concepts, other countries and classes can be at loss in negotiating their own texts and contexts. How to face this operational dimension, closely connected with the political dimension, stands out as one of the big challenges of our age.

4. *Language and Diplomacy*

The problem of how to face reality and what to do when realities are so different, is also the reason why, from the days of Woodrow Wilson, the notion of “open” diplomacy has been considered as a kind of myth. While the concept of openness is generally offered as an absolute and desirable value, almost equated with democracy, it is widely recognized that language openness may often turn into a serious obstacle to negotiation and an excess of words which could take the place of real action.

An example of this excess can be ordinarily found in the UN General Assembly, where a multitude of resolutions have little consequence of action. The same can be said of the Non-Aligned Movement and G-77 in defending the position of the South in the debates with the North. This mountain of words contained in the documents often have the only consequence of preventing developing countries from stronger engagement on individual and collective tasks⁸.

The theme of ambiguity is also often discussed with reference to its possible functions in the language of diplomacy. If negotiators can be explicit, precise and clear,

⁷ See N. FAIRCLOUGH, *Critical Discourse Analysis: the Critical Study of Language*, London, Longman, 1995, p. 136. See also B. HOCKING, *Foreign Ministries: Change & Adaptation*, London, Macmillan, 1999.

⁸ See UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE (USIP) CONFERENCE SERIES, *How the United States Negotiates*, Conference organised by the USIP, July 24-26, 2000, in *Peace Watch VI*, October 2000. The Public International Law & Policy Group (PILPG) Press, International at www.publicinternationallaw.org/publications.

their language may also reflect the simultaneous pursuit of both precision and ambiguity. The flexibility of languages offers ample space to ambiguity, whether intentional or unintentional, thus leaving scope for alternative interpretations induced by contextual factors. One of the earliest and most influential of modern scholars on the subject has defined ambiguity as «any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language».⁹ As a consequence of this, differences of competence in the language used may make the difference in negotiating contexts and texts, leading to negative, unequal conditions for the weaker negotiator.

On the other side, ambiguity can be strategically useful in a peace-agreement, where strategy is not concerned with the efficient *application* of force, but with the *exploitation* of *potential* force. A good example in this sense is the Rambouillet Accord Agreement (Interim Agreement for Peace and Self-Government in Kosovo. March 1999, Château de Rambouillet, France), where the mediators maintained the integrity of the draft and at the same time made a small step towards elaborating, at a later stage, a compromise between the negotiating parties¹⁰. In other words, «ambiguities make sure that, on the one hand, the parties retain their own individual perceptions as to how things should proceed and that, on the other, one common language is adopted, which both parties might later equally use».¹¹ The same strategies of positive ambiguity could also be applied to metaphors and historical analogies in order to loosen the link between a source and its target, giving diplomatic language more chances to move between present, past and future.

5. Identity Claims and New Rhetoric

Paradoxically, the very process of globalization has highlighted culture-specific reactions and identity claims. The development of a new school of rhetoric and interpretation has much contributed to focus attention on power relations and

⁹ W. EMPSON, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, London, Hogarth Press, 1927.

¹⁰ RAMBOUILLET ACCORD AGREEMENT, *Interim Agreement for Peace and Self-Government in Kosovo*, March 1999, Château de Rambouillet, France, 1999, reproduced at www.state.gov.

¹¹ D. PEHAR, *Use of Ambiguities in Peace Agreements*, in KURBALIJA - SLAVIK, eds., *Language and Diplomacy*, cit., p. 170.

asymmetrical cultural exchanges, promoting a vital discussion on the central issues of language, context and action¹².

I.E. Richards, M. McLuhan, K. Burke, Ch. Perelman, M. Foucault are just a few of the many seminal Authors who have made major contributions to the development of contemporary communication theories. Their studies have opened new perspectives and ways of looking at language and discourse. The neo-Aristotelian rhetoric becomes the «study of misunderstanding and its remedies»,¹³ exploring the reasons why and how language has produced and produces certain effects.

According to I.E. Richards, metaphors are the essence not only of language, but also of thought itself. They can help us understand how our mind works and how we can «control [...] the world that we make for ourselves to live in».¹⁴ McLuhan's powerful metaphor of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1965) is still the best proof and confirmation of Richards' theory.¹⁵ Acting as an electric shock on the reader's/listener's sensory perceptions, it remains a central representation of the problematic complexity of cultural development through communication.

In 1951 K. Burke summed up in one word the difference between old rhetoric as *persuasion* and new rhetoric as *identification*. The task of rhetoric becomes the achievement of *identification* between men, through the use of verbal or nonverbal symbolic strategies. A better understanding of all the resources of language is seen as a function to development and cooperation among people for a better life.¹⁶

New discursive means and methods of argumentation are increasingly developed to help larger and larger audiences in the sphere of action, proposing practical arguments as the required tool for disseminating ideas: «Only the existence of an argumentation that is neither compelling [...] nor arbitrary can give meaning to human freedom, a state in which a reasonable choice can be exercised [...]. The theory of argumentation will

¹² See R. VARYRYNEN, *Anti-Globalization Movements at the Crossroads*, in «Policy Brief», IV, 11, 2000.

¹³ I.A. RICHARDS, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1936, pp. 134-136.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See M. MCLUHAN, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press/London, Routledge, 1962.

¹⁶ See K. BURKE, *Rhetoric: Old and New*, in «Journal of General Education», 5, 1951.

help to develop [...] the justification of the possibility of a human community in the sphere of action».¹⁷

As we move forward in history from the Classical period and the Aristotelian logic to the contemporary “semiotic landscape”,¹⁸ rhetoric comes to be increasingly considered as a means of transforming society, visualizing the different variegated truths of mankind, implementing tools of action for freedom and justice against all petrifying dogmas. All “historical knowledges” are questioned in a kind of *Archaeology of Knowledge*,¹⁹ which reinforces the links between truth and discourse: «“Archaeology” would be the appropriate methodology of this analysis of local discursivities and “genealogy” would be the tacticts, whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play».²⁰

Bringing into play all socially distorted communication, in order to move society towards full emancipation and justice, becomes the central role of rhetoric. Language is increasingly proposed as *the ethics of responsibility*, the word given to the *other* and accepted as *other*, the interaction inviting mankind to respect and equity. All this implies a real strategy of *action* for all people, including those who have been excluded from being able to utilize significant discourse on a subject of importance to them.

Both a development of Classical rhetoric²¹ and an extremely significant branch of linguistics²² the modern Discourse Analysis has undertaken the task to explain *how* language is a medium for action, something that shapes our own lives,²³ proceeding from social order into language, from context to text. Halliday’s work in that sense is a self-proclaimed attempt «[...] to explain the linguistic process whereby the members

¹⁷ C. PERELMAN - L. OLBRECHTS-TYTEKA, *Traité de l’argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958 (Eng. tr.: J. WILKINSON - P. WEAVER, *The New Rhetoric: La Nouvelle Rhétorique: a Treatise on Argumentation*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 514.

¹⁸ See G. KRESS - T. VAN LEEUWEN, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, London, Routledge, 1996.

¹⁹ M. FOUCAULT, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1972.

²⁰ M. FOUCAULT, *Power/Knowledge* [Ed. Colin Gordon], New York, Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 85.

²¹ See T.A. VAN DIJK - W. KINTSCH, *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*, New York, Academic Press, 1983.

²² See M. CLYNE, *Inter-cultural Communication at Work*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

²³ See D. CRYSTAL, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

construct the social semiotic, whereby social reality is shaped, constrained and modified – processes – which, far from tending toward an ideal construction, admit and even institutionalize myopia, prejudice and misunderstanding».²⁴

Typically, linguists define discourse as an *all-inclusive text*, something that is a socially and historically situated *mode of action*.²⁵ Multimodality distinguishes an approach to communication and textual interpretation based on *social semiotics*, a development of traditional semiotics which sees interpretation and technology-mediated communication as a process rooted in society.²⁶

6. Hillary Clinton's *Negotiating Appeal*

Political Discourse Analysis and also Critical Discourse Analysis have been working hard on the strategic use of political concepts and keywords, focusing on the process of meaning construction, in the interaction of the text with previous knowledge and mental models.²⁷

Like *complete* books, diplomatic texts are a network of texts in which the frontiers are never clear-cut. Like books, they are «caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences».²⁸ They also represent, almost in visual terms, the story of how every human thing seems to make sense and to be “true” only within its epoch paradigms and panorama. The *semiotic landscape* of a text, like all geographical landscapes, will prove that all human social action is closely connected with the intrinsic characteristics of the land itself and with the culture-specific “directives” on how to use the land.²⁹

²⁴ M.A.K. HALLIDAY, *Language as Social Semiotic*, London, Edward Arnold, 1978, p. 126.

²⁵ See J.L. AUSTIN, *How To Do Things With Words* (Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955), in J.O. URMSON, ed., *The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962; J. SEARLE, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969; S. LEVINSON, *Pragmatics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

²⁶ See G. KRESS, *Visual and Verbal Modes of Representation in Electronically Mediated Communication: The Potentials of New Forms of Text*, in I. SNYDER, *Taking Literacy into the Electronic Era*, London, Routledge, 1998, pp. 53-79.

²⁷ See T.A. VAN DIJK, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 1998. Retrieved from <http://www.hum.uva.nl/teun/cda.htm>. See also J. GOLDEN - G. BERQUIST - W. COLEMAN, *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*, Dubuque, IA, Kendall/Hunt, 1989.

²⁸ M. FOUCAULT, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*, New York, Harper and Row, 1976.

²⁹ See G. KRESS - T. VAN LEEUWEN, *Multimodal Discourse*, London, Arnold Publishers, 2001.

The official speech held by Hillary Rodham Clinton, First Lady of The United States of America at the World Health Organization Forum on Women and Health Security, in Beijing, September 5 1995, is in the landscape of diplomatic speech-making at the United Nations. It is widely recognized that the UN is criticized for «appearing to be ineffective in times of emergencies; criticized for not having settled all the world's problems; and criticized for not having lived up to Harry Truman's hope that it would establish a worldwide rule of reason».³⁰ On the other side, the United Nations «remains the most effective international forum for debate [...] Over the years, it has done much to improve the way the world behaves and the way it seeks to improve itself».³¹

From another point of view, the symbolic nature of the UN has been underlined, as far as it seems to be its most important characteristic: «It will be said that the assimilation of the United Nations to drama – sacred or not – is no more than a metaphor. It is a metaphor and yet more than a metaphor, because the United Nations itself is a structure of metaphors. It may be safer to approach this structure in terms of recognized metaphor – the relevance of which one must try to demonstrate at every stage – than in literal and legalistic terms which tend, by their ordinary associations, to shut out from our recognition the elements of *fantasy*, *illusion* and *ritual* which make up so large a part of the actual life and function of the organization».³² Precisely in opposition to *fantasy*, *illusion* and *ritual* Hillary Clinton's speech is constructed. She transforms all emotions into concrete, positive action in order to realize what all women across the world *need* and *want*.

If the «essential condition for the speaker who has set himself the task of persuading concrete individuals is that his construction of the audience be adequate to the occasion»,³³ it must be recognized that Hillary's audience was perfect. More than 30.000 women had attended the preparatory meetings before the actual conference and there were 5.000 delegates present at the Forum, not to speak of the mass-media international audiences. An American delegation leader rightly observed that this was not the world forum on Woman, but the women's forum on the world.

³⁰ B. SAXTON, *Introduction*, in *UN Series 1* (audio tape), 1972.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² C.C. O'BRIEN - F. TOPOLSKI, *The United Nations: Sacred Drama*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1968. Italics ours.

³³ PERELMAN - OLBRECHTS-TYTEKA, *Traité de l'argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique*, cit., p. 19.

It must be considered that another recent world event, the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights, had already prepared the field for Hillary. On that occasion, the concept of female human rights was promulgated by women from all over the globe, intensifying networking about increasingly sophisticated future strategies. All main issues of the women's movements are introduced in her speech, legitimizing and elevating them to the rank of human rights: «[...] We cannot talk about equality and social development without also talking about *health care*». ³⁴ “Talking” about health care for Hillary means to introduce the women's most cogent issues into the big world organizations, but it means above all to introduce them into a *program for action against all negations of human rights*: «Scientists, doctors, nurses, community leaders and women themselves are working to improve and safeguard the health of women and families all over the world. If we join together as a global community, we can lift up the health and dignity of 50 all women and their families in the remaining years of the 20th century and on into the next millennium. Yet, for all the promise the future holds, we also know that many barriers lie in our way. For too long, women have been denied access to health care, education, economic 55 opportunities, legal protection and human rights – all of which are used as building blocks for a healthy and productive life». ³⁵

Medical Care becomes the strategic *keyword* to recall the dramatic conditions in which so many women live all over the world. By yoking human rights to the American faith in progress, science, collective problem-solving she is also entitled to speak of injustice and abuse of every kind as if they were just “blocks for a healthy and productive life”. This also allows her to introduce at last the themes of sex and violence, the so-called “social and cultural attitudes” which the United States and the UN Agencies had been always reluctant to interfere with: «Violence against women remains a leading cause of death among girls and women between the ages of 14 and 44 – violence from ethnic and religious conflicts, crime on the 125 streets and brutality in the home. For women who survive the violence, what often awaits them is a life of unrelenting physical and emotional pain that destroys their capacity for mothering,

³⁴ H. RODHAM CLINTON, as First Lady of The United States of America, *Official Speech at the World Health Organization Forum on Women and Health Security*, Beijing, September 5, 1995, 1, pp. 236-237. Reproduced at www.natcom.org.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-57.

homemaking or working and can lead to substance abuse, and even suicide. 130 Violence against girls and women goes beyond the beatings, rape, killings and forced prostitution that arise from poverty, wars and domestic conflicts. Every day, more than 5,000 young girls are forced to endure the brutal practice of genital mutilation. The procedure is painful and life – 135 threatening. It is degrading. And it is a violation of the physical integrity of a women's body, leaving a lifetime of physical and emotional scars».³⁶

A *strong opposition* between what has been done, what can be done, what is not yet done, characterizes the *chaining* of the discourse. Repetition of such negative word as *human suffering and pain, inadequate, inaccessible, unaffordable, indignity, disease, death*, underline her strategy of dramatic opposition to all easy or rhetorical solutions, and give impulse to the central vitality of the text. All her strategies are used to inspire belief and motivate action towards the “productive life”. Her speech becomes a sort of real *development plan* where the American identity merges into the different identities of women across the world, on the common ground of the *spirit of enterprise*. This allows the transformation of all fundamentally sensitive ideological/religious issues into the practical themes of *action* and *production*: «40 At long last, people and their government everywhere are beginning to understand that investing in the health of women and girls is as important to the prosperity of nations as investing in the development of open markets and trade. The health of women and girls cannot be divorced from progress 45 on other economic and social issues».³⁷

Though coherent with all the specifications and qualities UN addresses have as a *genre*,³⁸ Hillary’ speech becomes, most simply, the historical land where men and women fighting for human rights *unite* and *meet* a vision of the future.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-137.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-45.

³⁸ See R.T. DONAHUE - M.H. PROSSER, *Diplomatic Discourse: International Conflict at the UN – Addresses and Analysis*, Greenwich, CT, Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1997; J.M. SWALES, *Genre Analysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990; M.H. PROSSER, ed., *Sow the Wind, Reap the Whirlwind: Heads of State Address the United Nations*, vols. 2, New York, William Morrow, 1970.

