

Noncommunication in folklore

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The dialogue of the Enlightenment and the Romantic era produced a wealth of descriptions of mental states in which the interaction of nature and culture is manifest in specific experiences. Wonder, the sublime and melancholy, for example, all have one thing in common, and that is their power to render the person experiencing them speechless. According to Theodor W. Adorno, "the disinclination to talk about it (the category of natural and beauty, SK) is strongest where love of it survives. The 'How beautiful!' at the sight of a landscape insults its mute language and reduces its beauty" (1997, 69). The verbal admiration of a landscape would, by this logic, signify its examination more as a work of art than as part of nature, so that the unmediated idea of the experience vanishes. Two focal dimensions of noncommunication are articulated in the nature aesthetic emphasising the primacy of the sensory perception and experience: the mystery of explaining the experience and the protection of its authenticity.

"Where angels fear to tread"

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson addressed the problems of noncommunication in a work entitled *Angels Fear. An Investigation into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred* (1987; in Bantam edition *Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*, 1988). The work was edited by Mary Catherine Bateson, herself a linguist, from her father's posthumous and to some extent unfinished texts. The articles in the book and the 'metalogues' devised by the editor put forward various contextual dimensions of noncommunication, such as sacredness, secrecy, silence, innocence, ignorance and taboo. Gregory Bateson writes that noncommunication of certain sorts is needed if we are to maintain the 'sacred'. Thus framed, the sacred is, as it were, a general warning sign. "For fools rush in where angels fear to tread," wrote Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Criticism* of 1711; and it is to this idea that the title of the Bateson's book refers. In debating the protective aspect of silence and what may, in certain cases, be the harmful effect of speaking out, Bateson

arrives at the conclusion that "There are, of course, people who see it as almost a duty to communicate information that will give pain; and sometimes such people have wisdom on their side. I am not concerned here to judge these cases, except to note that these people form a subspecies of those who rush in where angels fear to tread" (1988, 89).

The problems on noncommunication may, in addition to adopting the approaches of communication theory and the philosophy of life, also be framed cybernetically by asking, in the words of Bateson: "Are there perhaps processes in the working of all living systems such that, if news or information of these processes reaches other parts of the system, the working together of the whole will be paralysed or disrupted?". Maybe the main overall principle of noncommunication is nevertheless crystallised in the following sentence: "Communication is undesirable, not because of fear, but because communication would somehow alter the nature of ideas" (1988, 80).

Bateson's interpretation of noncommunication is not, therefore, founded on binary or digital oppositions. In other words, we are not dealing with a mechanical communication model in which every word that is uttered or written means leaving all other words unuttered or unwritten. Nor do the well-known propositions "you cannot not communicate" or "you cannot not behave" invalidate the noncommunication aspect. The main thing about these maxims is that people will always behave somehow - even when they are alone - and they cannot, in the company of others, help expressing themselves in some way or other, if not in spoken words then in gestures, facial expressions, the way they dress, their posture and even their absence.

Another crucial consideration from the point of view of noncommunication is that messages are transmitted analogically at a number of contextual levels and via different channels. Information can thus be directed, regulated, hidden, filtered, framed, reinforced. For example, an agreement between two people not to reveal a secret may be extremely meaningful at the level of their intercourse, whereas in some other context this same secret may have no communicative status whatsoever. The real secrets are the ones we never dreamt existed. (Ketola & al. 2002)

Motifs and noncommunication

Matters assigned to the domain of noncommunication have in folkloristics usually been examined by means of comparative motif analysis. Hence a genre

has been taken as the reference for a motif - such as silence - and the plot (cause and consequence) as its meaning. What I am concerned with here is the way the noncommunication perspective is manifest in folklore both as discursive demands and conditions and as constructivist strategies.

There are well-known folktales explaining why a princess is not allowed to speak or laugh (AT 451, see Aarne & Thompson 1987), or a man to wash (or blow his nose) for three or seven or twelve years (AT 361); it is likewise made abundantly clear that the origin of supernatural powers must not be disclosed, either on pain of losing the said powers or, in the direst case, the owner's life (AT 670). The significant thing as far as noncommunication is concerned is that some channel for human communication is blocked off at the textual level of the tales, which then go on to describe what happens as a result. Technically speaking, this is a disturbance in the communication. Such narratives deliberately violate the phatic function of communication, which establishes and maintains contact, keeps the channels of communication open. Geoffrey N. Leech writes about "the metalinguistic 'Phatic Maxim', which may be provisionally formulated either in its negative form 'Avoid silence' or in its positive form 'Keep talking'" (1983, 141).

The mirror

Important from the perspective of noncommunication are the implicit, unspoken premises (enthymema) that create gaps in the narrative and sometimes make it enigmatic. In addressing the relationship between anecdotes and their impact Ted Cohen (1983) gives an example of one of which he claims to be particularly fond.

This anecdote is about an old couple living far away in a remote region, neither of which has ever seen a mirror. One day the man finds a piece of a mirror. He takes it up to his attic, carefully polishes it and gazes long into it. Finally he calls out, "Father!". During the weeks that follow he often goes up to the attic and spends many an hour there. His wife begins to get worried at the way he is behaving and to doubt his fidelity. One day while he is out she goes up to the attic and immediately spots the mirror. She gazes into it and goes back downstairs, muttering to herself, "What a relief. My old man would never fall for such a wrinkled old woman. She looks just like my mother."

The implicit premise of this example, and the comic condition, is that the old couple do not know what they look like. The significant thing from the noncommunication perspective is, in turn, that neither says a word to the other about the mirror (or indeed about anything else in this text), but they speak themselves. "In

the process of autocommunication”, writes Yuri M. Lotman (1990, 29), “the actual person is reformed and this process is connected with a very wide range of cultural functions, ranging from the sense of individual existence which in some types of culture is essential, to self-discovery and auto-psychotherapy.” According to the narrative logic, on the other hand, the discussion the couple do not have is important as regards both the humorous effect and the preservation of their marriage. The communicative context is constructed out of the fact that both know of the mirror’s existence, but the man does not know that his wife knows. According to Bateson, “the letter that you do not write, the apology that you do not offer, the food that you do not put out for the cat - all these can be sufficient and effective messages because zero, in context, can be meaningful; and it is the recipient of the message who creates the context” (1980, 56).

Cross-species knowledge

One of the things about secrets is that people do not mention them, and that they even conceal the fact that they know they exist. In the recent example the man revealed the secret in his conduct, even though he did not tell his wife why he kept going up to the attic. It is precisely this fatal dimension of noncommunication, the disclosure of the knowledge that a secret exists, that is to be the man’s downfall in the tale about the man who understood the language of animals (AT 670). The man was given the gift by a snake whose life he saved. But he only received the gift on condition that he did not reveal to anyone in any way, even by the way he behaved, that he could understand “what the animals say“. Otherwise he would lose the ability or even his life. But it so happened that once in his wife’s presence he laughed at what the animals were saying. His wife asked him what he was laughing at, and when he failed to reply, the existence of a secret was let out. He did not, however, say what this secret was. According to some versions, his wife died of curiosity. In one Finnish variant (of 1846) the man decides to reveal the secret and die. But at precisely that moment he hears a cock expressing its amazement at a man’s inability to keep one woman under his control when he, the cock, can command a whole hen house. “Then the man gets up from the bench and beats his wife. And so the secret was kept. And from then onwards they lived well.“

Bateson quotes a Bali version of this tale. In it the main character is the old folk hero Adji Darma, who cannot not communicate the fact that there is a secret, “and this is what he failed to do“. The key question of all conspiracy theories is similarly by nature ontological: is there a secret? Once the interrogator or torturer

discovers whether or not his victim knows the secret, everything is easier; the only thing to be gained from breaking the bones of the innocent is sadistic pleasure. Often secret and sacred are interwoven. Bateson writes:

We find over and over again in different parts of the world and different epochs of religious thought a recurrent emphasis on the notion that discovery, invention, and knowledge in general must be regarded as dangerous.. Greek mythology proposes the danger of knowledge again and again, especially cross-sex knowledge, which is always fatal. (1988, 80)

In her metalogue of secrets Mary Catherine Bateson is in agreement with her father that the theme of the importance of a secret pervades mythology from all sorts of cultures. But she regards the story of Adji Darma more as an example of misogyny. It simply makes the woman the fool who rushes in where angels fear to tread (1988, 83-84). And indeed, the men's secrets in European magic tales, legends and anecdotes often refer to success, wealth and power, while those of women are their sins (cf. AT 517; the boy who understands the language of birds reveals that the haughty princess is guilty of infanticide). Aili Nenola writes: "At issue is also what the tradition does not say, on what points it remains silent.. [Or] where were the father or brother or parish priest of the Swedish Magdalena while she lived for eight years in the forest, eating leaves and doing penance? The tradition does not mention their sins or punishment" (1998, 268).

Both narratives are in their own way also examples of the failure of noncommunication. By acting in a different way the men could possibly have safeguarded their secret. It is easy to imagine the discussions stimulated by such tales and asking, for example, why the man who could understand the language of animals simply did not lie to his wife or invent some excuse. The answer is quite simple: because then there would be no story.

The dirty man

Conditional prohibitions are not confined exclusively to verbal behaviour: you can do anything so long as you do not eat of this tree, open this door, pick these flowers, drink from this spring, and so on. In tale type AT 361 the man makes a pact with the devil. He will receive an immense sum of money so long as he does not wash himself in any way for seven (or three) years. There are also some extra conditions: he must, for example, wear a bearskin that makes him "inhuman", an anomaly that does not fit into any category (see Douglas 1989). The dirt, stench and animal appearance which the man cannot hide or fail to communicate arouse repulsion and fear in others. There is nothing in the pact about what he is allowed to say. The texts do not, for example, mention whether or not he is allowed to tell people of his pact. This nevertheless seems to be an implicit premise; we know from other contexts, such as witch hunts, that an alliance with the devil is always

secret and that revealing it will always mean death in some form or another. But the "dirty man" - at least in the Grimm versions - begs people to pray for the salvation of his soul.

The turning point (*peripateia*) comes in the tale when "the dirty man" pays off the debts of an impoverished estate and in return is granted the youngest daughter as his wife; sometimes the sum of money is given only on condition that the girl kisses (or makes love to) the "dirty man", which she does out of love or respect for her father. When the prescribed number of years have passed, the dirty man reappears, now clean, handsome and rich, to claim the girl promised to him as his wife. Only then is it revealed to the bride and her envious sisters just what the man was protecting in failing to explain the causal relationship between his dirtiness (anomaly) and wealth. This tale is an example of how noncommunication can produce a desired result: the hero wins a fortune and a wife. The envious sisters hang themselves and the devil thus claims two souls instead of one. Evil gets its reward.

Silence and salvation

The most frequently recurring aspect of noncommunication in folklore is keeping silence. According to Ruth Bottigheimer (1987, 52), speech and silence can be analysed in literary texts at five levels at least: the historical, narrative, textual, lexical and editorial. To this we may add that each level can also be examined from the noncommunication aspect and, for example, ask what potential messages remain uncommunicated at the various levels. I do not in this context wish to take a look at the narrative significance of silence, its textual distribution or gender differences, about which Bottigheimer (1986; 1987) in particular has written with such breadth and perception. Instead I wish to examine what is communicated and what is not by the silence in tales of the type *The Twelve Brothers*, AT 451 ("You must be dumb for seven years, and may not speak or laugh").

The plot of the tale consists of a chain of secrets and their revelation:

1. The queen tells her twelve sons of the king's decision that they must die if the next child to be born is a girl.
2. The mother reveals the same secret to the daughter, who sets off in search of her brothers, who have run away.
3. The youngest of the brothers hides his sister and only reveals the secret when the other brothers promise not to kill "the first woman they come across".
4. The girl picks twelve flowers, at which the brothers are turned into ravens (swans, wolves). An old woman tells the girl a secret means of turning her brothers back into humans: she must not speak or laugh for seven years.

5. The king finds the girl in the forest (in a tree) and proposes marriage to her, at which she nods her consent (she cannot not communicate). Her step-mother convinces everyone that the girl's dumbness is a sign of "evil power".

6. The girl, now the queen, is to be burnt to death as a witch. At the very last moment the seven years are up. Her brothers fly along and turn into humans again. They put the flames out and save their sister, who can now reveal the reason for her silence. The step-mother is burnt "so that evil may be banished from the world".

Each of the episodes of the tale is about life and death. The hiding motifs (the boys escape into the forest, the girl hides from her brothers until they agree not to kill her; the girl spends the time she must remain silent in the forest and a tree, where the king/the king's son finds her) are manifest as noncommunication in that the characters do not send out messages about themselves. Hiding in nature (cf. mimicry), is for many creatures a strategy and condition for survival.

When the girl in the tale picks the twelve flowers that for one reason or another represent the human lives of her brothers, the innocent unknowingly and unwittingly becomes guilty. And when the keeper of the secret, the old woman, tells her the conditions on which her brothers can be turned back into humans, the sister immediately believes her and is silent from that moment onwards. Then when the king (or prince) finds her, the tale begins to describe the problems caused by this dumbness at behavioural level and the suspicions it arouses. Only the main character and the listeners/readers know what the silence, noncommunication, is safeguarding and will ultimately atone for and save.

Noncommunication as constructivist assessment

The frame for noncommunication in each of the example narratives is the relationships and borders between fundamental categories. In the first tale, framed as comic, the man believes he is looking at his dead father; in other words, he crosses the absolute existential border. This secret is not discovered by his wife even though she finds the mirror. The dirty man, on the other hand, is socially outlawed from the human category to an anomalous state in which he is threatened by animals and humans alike. The man who understands the language of animals has to hide an ability that permits the cognitive crossing of the borders between species. And in the last example the king's daughter unwittingly causes her brothers to be turned into non-humans. Each main character involuntarily operates to a greater or lesser degree in regions where even angels fear to tread. These are stories about "the need to limit or control knowledge or communication across species lines and across gender lines" (Bateson 1988, 84).

As a textual strategy, noncommunication demands that people are identified by their words and deeds. This is also emphasised by Eva Österberg in her article

about strategies of silence in Icelandic sagas: "People are identified through what they say and they are identified with their speech." This applies equally well to men and women. "When the important women - the powerful instigators of action - say something in the sagas, their speech is highly charged with meaning and potentially as dangerous as any man's." (1991, 15-16). Although female and male silence differ markedly from one another in tales, as Bottigheimer has pointed out, the breaking of agreements and promises, the revealing of secrets is dangerous to all involved.

The examples I have quoted here were, of course, chosen to prove my point, but as folklorists are well aware, they are not unique. Sources of folklore of different types and from different eras provide instructions and warnings not to intervene in the course of events, because otherwise their nature (idea) will change. In the network on belief systems, writes Mihály Hoppál (1998, 157), "each element - node - is in correlation with the other elements, even if through an intermediate element; this interrelation is the very reason why the mythological and/or belief systems are such long-lasting."

Noncommunication is not, therefore, a motif manifest in narratives but an intermediate, constructivist perspective from which it may be possible to read something "that has never been written". Textually, it can be examined as a narrative device which, by blocking the premises and protecting the ideas, constructs various ways of solving problems.

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