

# Lorenzo Cantoni

## *Communication and Common Good*

*In this article the close relationship between common good and communication – especially verbal communication – is presented and discussed. Four paths, in particular, are explored to shed light onto this relationship: (i) their common linguistic roots; (ii) language as the very condition for the common good to be discussed; (iii) language as part of the common good; and (iv) language as a powerful image of what the common good is. At the end of the article, (v) a brief reflection on the Allegory of the Good Government by Ambrogio Lorenzetti helps to further clarify the studied connection.*

### Introduction

The very issue of common good – its definition(s) and the ways to promote it – cannot be avoided by any citizen, family or organization. It challenges also, and with high expectations, the academia. A university, in fact, is called to serve the common good of society, which expects from it that those pieces of knowledge necessary or highly relevant for its present and future life are explored and further expanded (the goal of *research*), communicated (*teaching*), eventually providing also a beneficial impact onto the community that is hosting and funding it (*service*).

A Faculty of Communication Sciences, in particular, should carefully listen to this call, and take full responsibility in answering to it.

In this article I will present the close relationship between common good and communication – especially verbal communication – exploring four converging paths: (i) their common linguistic roots; (ii) language as the very condition for the common good to be discussed; (iii) language as an important part of the common good; and finally (iv) language as a powerful image of what the common good is. A fifth approach will be proposed, exploring the same relationship in the Frescoes that Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted in Siena to represent the Good Government.

### First path: common good and communication share their own linguistic roots

First of all, both expressions share part of their linguistic roots, which come most probably from the Latin words *cum* and *munus*. While *cum* means together, *munus* means a good, which is also a task, as it happens in the Italian *caro*: something we like, as well as something expensive.

*Communicare*, then, means to share an important good – at the same time loved and demanding – with somebody else: means making it *common*. What is that *munus*? It is our very spiritual self, who we are, our thoughts, beliefs, fears, hopes, loves... something that, as human beings, we couldn't share otherwise with the same force.

## Second path: language is the condition itself for the common good to be named and shared

In the very beginning of the *Politics*, Aristotle argues that human beings are naturally sociable, and demonstrates this using the following arguments: «For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state»<sup>1</sup>.

It is not by chance that for many centuries the very basis of human education and training has been the *Trivium*: Dialectics, Grammar and Rhetoric<sup>2</sup>. All of them are concerned with communication: how to think correctly and provide sound arguments (Dialectics/Logic), how to communicate what has been thought using a shared language (Grammar), and how to communicate in a way that is optimal for the addressee to understand and be persuaded (Rhetoric). At the same time, and due to that, the model of a good citizen was a *Vir bonus dicendi peritus*<sup>3</sup>: a virtuous man expert in communication...

1 «διότι δὲ πολιτικὸν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ζῶν πάσης μελίττης καὶ παντὸς ἀγελαίου ζῶου μᾶλλον, δῆλον. οὐθὲν γάρ, ὡς φαμέν, μάτην ἢ φύσις ποιεῖ: λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζῴων: ἡ μὲν οὖν φωνὴ τοῦ λυπηροῦ καὶ ἡδέος ἐστὶ σημεῖον, διὸ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὑπάρχει ζῴοις (μέχρι γὰρ τούτου ἡ φύσις αὐτῶν ἐλήλυθε, τοῦ ἔχειν αἰσθησιν λυπηροῦ καὶ ἡδέος καὶ ταῦτα σημαίνειν ἀλλήλοις), ὁ δὲ λόγος ἐπὶ τῷ δηλοῦν ἐστὶ τὸ συμφέρον καὶ τὸ βλαβερὸν, ὥστε καὶ τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἄδικον: τοῦτο γὰρ πρὸς τὰ ἄλλα ζῶα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἴδιον, τὸ μόνον ἀγαθοῦ καὶ κακοῦ καὶ δικαίου καὶ ἀδίκου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων αἰσθησιν ἔχειν: ἡ δὲ τούτων κοινωνία ποιεῖ οἰκίαν καὶ πόλιν», Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a. See the English translation in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 21, translated by H. Rackham, Harvard University Press - William Heinemann Ltd., Cambridge, MA - London 1944.

2 For a modern proposal of the Trivium, see L. Cantoni, Nicoletta Di Blas, Sara Rubinelli, Stefano Tardini, *Pensare e comunicare*, Apogeo, Milano 2008; for a discussion of the relationship between communication and education see also: L. Cantoni, "Educational Communication and The Case for ICTs. A two ways route", «Studies in Communication Sciences», 6/2, 2006, pp. 9-22.

3 Quintilianus, *Institutio oratoria*, l. XII.

So, human language is not just designed to share utilitarian info, but especially what we have seen above as being the human-specific *munus*: good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities; in other words, language is needed for society to name any common good to be looked for.

### Third path: language is part of a society's common good

As suggested by the previous path, language is needed by a society in order to exist: which is true at the social level – every community is to share and somehow agree-upon what is just and unjust, good and bad – as well as at the personal level, as a story reported by Salimbene da Parma (1221-1288) about the emperor Federico II (1194-1250) portrays in a very vivid way. The emperor wanted to know which was the first original language of humanity, so ordered that a group of newborn babies be raised without speaking to them, not even smiling or singing songs. But he was working in vain, notes Salimbene, because no one was able to survive under those conditions<sup>4</sup>...

Being language a common good itself, organized societies define one or more official languages, to be protected and promoted. In this respect, let us just mention the very paradigmatic case of the Swiss federal Constitution, which defines at its very beginning: «The National Languages are German, French, Italian, and Romansh» (art. 4); it ensures that no one could be discriminated because of their language (art. 8), and that «The freedom to use any language is guaranteed» (art. 18). In case of deprivation of liberty, «anyone has the right to be notified without delay and in a language they can understand of the reasons for their detention and of their rights» (art. 31, 2). Then it devotes the full article 70 to languages, where the matter is further clarified and elaborated as follows: «1. The official languages of the Confederation shall be German, French and Italian. Romansh shall also be an official language of the Confederation when communicating with persons who speak Romansh. 2. The Cantons shall decide on their official languages. In order to preserve harmony between linguistic communities, the Cantons shall respect the traditional territorial distribution of languages and take account of indigenous linguistic minorities. 3. The Confederation and the Cantons shall encourage understanding and exchange between the linguistic communities. 4. The Confederation shall support the

4 «Secunda eius superstitio fuit quia voluit experiri cuiusmodi linguam et loquelam haberent pueri, cum adolevisent, si cum nemine loquerentur. Et ideo precepit baiulis et nutricibus ut lac infantibus darent, ut mammas sugerent, et balnearent et mundificarent eos, sed nullo modo blandirentur eis nec loquerentur. Volebat enim cognoscere utrum Hebream linguam haberent, que prima fuerat, an Grecam vel Latinam vel Arabicam aut certe linguam parentum suorum ex quibus nati fuissent. Sed laborabat incassum, quia pueri sive infantes moriebant omnes. Non enim vivere possent sine applausu et gestu et letitia faciei et blanditiis baiularum et nutricum suarum», Salimbene de Adam da Parma, *Cronica*, par. 1664, MUP Editore, Parma 2007, p. 980. See also, on the same subject, Claudia Navarini, “Filogenesi e ontogenesi del linguaggio. L’umanità contesa dei ‘bambini selvaggi’”, «L’analisi linguistica e letteraria», anno II, n. 1, 1994, pp. 221-252.

plurilingual Cantons in the fulfillment of their special duties. 5. The Confederation shall support measures by the Cantons of Graubünden and Ticino to preserve and promote the Romansh and the Italian languages»<sup>5</sup>.

Besides being an important common good itself, language can be also considered as a very interesting example of what a common good is. This perspective will be taken in the next path.

#### **Fourth path: language is a paradigmatic example of what common good is**

One of the main challenges one has in defining the common good is due to its inner tension. In fact, on one side common good should be shared by all, on the other side, it should be for everybody, no one excluded – otherwise it would not be neither *common* nor *good* enough... Different perspectives throughout the history have stressed more one polarity up to the point of losing the other one: either preferring the *all* against *everybody*, or *vice-versa*.

Here, I believe, language can help shed light on how it is possible to strike the right balance between *all* and *everybody*.

On the one side, language is, in itself, something we use to express our deep identity, and to define who we are; whichever our position might be about the relationship between thought and language, we must admit that thought is deeply connected with language.

On the other side, language is – by definition – something we have in common with many others, otherwise it would lose its own nature and become completely useless. The case of personal pronouns is paradigmatic in this respect: I am myself, and you are you, but I must accept – to have any functioning language – that you refer to yourself as I, and to myself as you<sup>6</sup>. Which means that the tools themselves I'm using to refer to myself, and to express and communicate my thoughts at the same time are authentically mine, and belong necessarily also to many others.

#### **Fifth path: communication and the frescoes of Good Government by Ambrogio Lorenzetti**

As suggested by Alois Riklin<sup>7</sup>, medieval times have left to us not only the *Summa* of philosophy by Thomas from Aquinas, and the poetical *Summa* by Dante

5     Languages are also mentioned under art. 175, 4: «In electing the Federal Council, care must be taken to ensure that the various geographical and language regions of the country are appropriately represented».

6     See Émile Benveniste, *Structure des relations de personne dans le verbe*, in Idem, *Problèmes de linguistique générale I*, Gallimard, Paris 1966, pp. 225-236.

7     See Alois Riklin, *Ambrogio Lorenzetti's politische Summe*, Wallstein Vlg., Göttingen 2003; see also L. Cantoni, "Il «Buon Governo». Una lettura", «Cristianità», 345 (2008), pp. 16-18.

Alighieri, but also a political *Summa*: the frescoes depicted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (about 1280-1348) in the Sala della Pace (Room of Peace) in Siena.

The painter communicates in a most vivid way what does it mean a quest for common good, represented by the (Bonum) Commune of the city of Siena. The representation encompasses, on three walls of about 35 meters, the allegory of Good Government, its positive effects onto the city and the countryside, as well as the allegory of Bad Government, and its negative effects. If we just focus on the allegory of Good Government, which occupies the very center of the composition, not only pictorial communication, but also linguistic communication plays a major role. Let's just consider three main aspects.

First of all, there are several texts, both in the ordinary language – to make sure that most of the citizens could understand them – as well as in Latin; they present a brief poem/song on the Bonum Commune, name the allegoric figures, and offer quotations from the Bible.

Second, on the very base of the frescoes, the three disciplines of the Trivium were represented, to suggest that they provide a major contribution to the well-being of a community.

Third, the twenty fourth citizens represented in the fresco are having a gentle conversation among them: their harmony in listening and speaking to each other is depicted by the fact that – even if they are clearly different when it comes to their garments – no one is higher than the others, and all of them are bringing together a rope, which combines two ropes coming from the person representing Justice, put together by Concordia (Harmony), and ending to the wrist of a severe wise man, embodying the Commune / Bonum Commune. It is that harmonious communication about – as suggested by Aristotle – the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, which makes it possible for Peace to shine at the very barycenter of the Fresco.

Those ropes pulled in the same direction by all citizens do not only represent the effect of Concordia – as per a naïve etymology: *cum + chorda* – they also suggest, in the shining of a pictorial representation, the harmony of different musical strings and vocal cords, playing and singing the same chant to the *Bonum Commune*.

Lorenzo Cantoni  
Università della Svizzera italiana  
lorenzo.cantoni@usi.ch

**Lorenzo Cantoni** è professore presso la Facoltà di Scienze della Comunicazione dell'Università della Svizzera italiana (Lugano), di cui è anche Decano. Dopo una laurea in filosofia, e un dottorato in pedagogia delle lingue, si è specializzato in comunicazione online, specialmente negli ambiti dell'educazione e del turismo. Ulteriori informazioni sul suo blog: <http://newmine.blogspot.com>.