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Is this the end of dialogue? A crisis of words in a conflict-ridden society

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Abstract

The word seems to have lost its value in today's societies.

It is no longer a space of mediation and shared meaning; instead, it increasingly reflects fragmentation, polarisation, and symbolic violence. In light of current conflicts in the European public sphere, this article examines the sociological roots and consequences of the crisis of language and the end of negotiation in democratic life. Drawing on key theoretical contributions by leading contemporary thinkers, the article analyses how performative, identity-based and algorithmically distorted language use has eroded trust, stifled public deliberation and escalated the risk of conflict. Two contemporary case studies inform the discussion: the war between Russia and Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and Gaza. These ongoing events are examined to demonstrate how language breakdowns can precede and perpetuate the failure of diplomacy, mutual recognition, and peace processes. The paper argues that rehabilitating language as a generative and relational act is essential to restoring democratic resilience and social cohesion. In an era of radical pluralism and digital fragmentation, only a renewed ethics of language can sustain the possibility of coexistence.

La parola sembra aver perso il suo valore nelle società odierne.

Non è più uno spazio di mediazione e significato condiviso; riflette invece sempre più frammentazione, polarizzazione e violenza simbolica. Alla luce dei conflitti attuali nella sfera pubblica europea, questo articolo esamina le radici sociologiche e le conseguenze della crisi del linguaggio e della fine della negoziazione nella vita democratica. Basandosi sui principali contributi teorici di importanti pensatori contemporanei, l'articolo analizza come l'uso performativo, identitario e algoritmicamente distorto del linguaggio abbia eroso la fiducia, soffocato la deliberazione pubblica ed elevato il rischio di conflitto. Due casi di studio contemporanei orientano la discussione: la guerra tra Russia e Ucraina e il conflitto tra Israele e Gaza.

Questi eventi in corso vengono esaminati per mostrare come le rotture del linguaggio possano precedere e perpetuare il fallimento della diplomazia, del riconoscimento reciproco e dei processi di pace. Il contributo sostiene che riabilitare il linguaggio come atto generativo e relazionale sia essenziale per ripristinare la resilienza democratica e la coesione sociale.

In un'epoca di radicale pluralismo e frammentazione digitale, solo una rinnovata etica del linguaggio può sostenere la possibilità di convivenza.

Keywords: communication; conflict; negotiation; word; ecology; media.

1. Introduction

The word 'logos' comes from the Greek verb 'legein', meaning 'to gather' or 'to bind'. In Italian, we find this etymological root in 'legare', meaning 'to bind', as well as in 'religion'. It is through words that meaning can be reconstructed, relationships established and maintained, decisions made to walk a path together with others and divergences reconciled.

Without words, it becomes impossible to form alliances, make promises or understand each other. However, the word requires discipline in order not to be empty and thus annihilate reality.

The idea that words are mere tools destroys relationships, meaning and the world. In fact, it is the word that makes us exist as individuals and establishes us as a society.

This is why, when electing public officials, it is crucial to demand respect for the intimate link between words, knowledge and actions. We are inundated with words that are 'no longer worth anything'.

Contradictory promises and declarations without real commitment are commonplace in today's communication, where 'the given word no longer holds people together'. Social media reinforces this degradation of language, with fake news representing a cynical and instrumental use of words that privileges the effect over adherence to the truth (Tota, 2020; Couldry, 2023; Buoncompagni, 2024).

Contemporary capitalism has also contributed to the dissolution of stable meanings, leading to a relativism in which 'everything is negotiable in terms of meanings'.

In this context, words lose their ability to provide orientation and construct meaning, reducing themselves to tools of manipulation.

In order to counteract this trend, a new ecology of language seems necessary; one that reconnects with its relational and generative nature. We need words that are 'in motion', capable of expressing our sense of precariousness and helping us to navigate the present era. Such words should be 'transitive', open to the past and future, and 'deponent', capable of receiving and transforming rather than imposing (Magatti, 2022).

In contemporary society, words need to be rehabilitated as tools for building bonds and shared meanings, overcoming their instrumental use and recovering their generative and orienting function.

Therefore, at the heart of advanced modernity, Western democracies are confronted with a profound transformation of public language.

Discourse, understood as a space of symbolic mediation and the collective construction of meaning, is now seemingly undergoing a structural crisis affecting its epistemic, ethical, and relational status. Rather than constituting a meeting place, words seem to be increasingly reduced to instruments of polarisation, strategic performativity, or simple vehicles of emotional disintermediation (Postman, 1985; Sunstein, 2017).

Although this transformation has been latent for some time, it has become more acute with the emergence of three converging dynamics: the disintegration of the common symbolic fabric; the rise of disintermediated communication methods, primarily on social media; and the growing institutional inability to govern conflict through negotiation processes.

The result is an impoverishment of public language, making it difficult, if not impossible, to construct shared meanings, manage dissent, and plan for the future collectively (Habermas, 1981; Magatti & Giaccardi, 2019).

In light of this phenomenon, there is a need for sociological reflection on the value of language and its role in maintaining social bonds. This contribution aims to investigate the connection between the crisis of the word and the end of negotiation from a theoretical and critical perspective. Specifically, we explore the relationship between the crisis of language and the breakdown of negotiation, considering it not only as a political or legal process, but also as a symbolic means of accommodating differences.

Specifically, we explore the feasibility of maintaining a communicative space that can accommodate conflict in a non-destructive manner and the potential of language to facilitate connections between individuals, identities, and diverse worldviews (Redwood et al., 2018; Lombardi, 2023).

Starting with a theoretical overview of classic and contemporary sociological texts, the article intends to demonstrate how language has progressively lost its generative and negotiating qualities.

Instead of communication based on mutual recognition and understanding, fragmented, oversimplified or strategically oriented forms of communication prevail today.

Through the analysis of discursive practices in political, media and social spheres, we will also attempt to demonstrate how this linguistic crisis is both a symptom of and a cause of the erosion of the social contract. When the word is stripped of its symbolic value, it ceases to be a bond, a promise or a responsibility. Without a binding word, negotiation itself becomes impossible.

Finally, the paper will propose some sociological and ethical-cultural perspectives for recovering a language that can support plurality and the construction of meaning.

Finally, the paper will propose some sociological and ethical-cultural perspectives for the recovery of a language capable of supporting plurality and the construction of meaning, in the belief that a society that is no longer able to negotiate is a society exposed to paralysis or violence.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology rooted in sociological theory and discourse analysis. The research follows a multi-layered approach (Karlsen, 2021):

- a. Desk analysis and theoretical framework analysis. Core sociological theories concerning language, communication, and the public sphere – particularly those of Habermas, Bourdieu, Arendt, and Magatti – are critically examined to construct a conceptual lens through which to interpret the contemporary role of language in social life;
- b. Case-Oriented Comparative Approach. The paper includes two case studies – Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza conflicts – chosen for their high geopolitical relevance and the symbolic centrality of language in shaping both domestic and international perceptions. Each case is explored through official statements, diplomatic narratives, and public media, focusing on how language contributes to the escalation or blockage of negotiation;
- c. Socio-symbolic Interpretation. Beyond textual analysis, the study interprets the cultural and institutional implications of discursive practices, particularly regarding their impact on trust, legitimacy, and collective agency.

This methodological design allows for both depth of theoretical insight and contextual application, aiming not to produce generalizable findings but to offer a sociologically grounded diagnosis of a symbolic and political crisis.

3. The word between communication, social bond and crisis

In order to understand the value of the word in contemporary society, it is necessary to recall the main theoretical traditions that have addressed the issue of language as the foundation of social life.

Three perspectives are particularly important for building a critical analysis of the crisis of public language and its negotiating function: These are Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action (1981), Niklas Luhmann's systemic approach (1968) and the concept of 'generative speech', which was developed more recently by Bauman (2020) and adopted by Italian academics Mauro Magatti and Chiara Giaccardi (2019).

Starting with Habermas, speech is the original basis for the construction of intersubjective rationality in his thought.

In his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Habermas contrasts communicative action with instrumental action: in the former, individuals strive for mutual understanding through valid arguments, whereas in the latter, communication is merely a means of manipulation or control. According to Habermas, the crisis of language coincides with the ‘colonisation of the vital world’ by economic and administrative systems, which render language incapable of facilitating dialogue and truth. In this sense, the decline of negotiation can be seen as a consequence of the increasing dominance of instrumental logics in public spheres.

Niklas Luhmann, on the other hand, proposes an alternative paradigm in which communication is not viewed as the transmission of shared meanings, but as a process of selecting information, messages, and understandings.

In his theoretical system, communication is autopoietic; that is to say, it is produced and reproduced as a function of the system itself. This implies that, in different subsystems such as politics, law and the economy, the word does not have universal value, but rather functional value. From this perspective, the crisis of language is not so much a degeneration as a structural consequence of the functional differentiation of modern society; each system has its own ‘language’, which makes intersystem negotiation increasingly difficult.

In his best-known work, *Liquid Modernity* (2000), the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes a society in which social bonds and symbolic codes become unstable, fluctuating and precarious. In this context, language loses its anchoring capacity: words no longer refer to shared, lasting meanings, but instead multiply in continuous, ephemeral and often self-referential flows. Public communication thus becomes a fragmented arena in which confrontation replaces conflict and the short-lived popularity of likes or memes supplants the long-term practice of dialogue and deliberation.

In this scenario, negotiation increasingly appears as a ritualised exception rather than an ordinary practice.

In opposition to this trend, Italian sociologists Mauro Magatti and Chiara Giaccardi propose the concept of ‘generative speech’ (2014, 2020). They define this as an act that opens up the future, creates relationships, and promotes trust. At a time of multiple crises and growing disaffection with public speech, the authors argue that rediscovering an ‘inhabited’ form of speech – one that is responsible and embodied – is one of the few ways to reactivate inclusive and constructive social dynamics.

Generative speech is relational and symbolic, rooted in an ethic of gift and care, rather than being neutral or technical. It contrasts with strategic and cynical speech, which dominate political and communicative contexts today.

These perspectives converge on one crucial point: negotiation is not only a procedural fact, but also a symbolic act that requires trust in the power of words. When language loses its reliability, negotiation becomes impossible because there is no longer any common ground on which compromises, mutual recognition or shared narratives can be built.

Words cease to be promises and become mere performances; they cease to build bridges and instead become barriers. The theoretical framework outlined here therefore provides a means of understanding how the crisis of language translates into a paralysis of the social bond and the collective capacity to make decisions and act together.

4. From the word to performance

While the theoretical framework has demonstrated that language is fundamental to the social bond and the ability to negotiate, empirical observations of contemporary public languages reveal a structural shift in how language is utilised, perceived, and acted upon today. In this section, we analyse discursive dynamics, primarily in political, media, and digital spheres, that contribute to the progressive loss of the word's negotiating value.

One of the most visible manifestations of the crisis of the word is in the political arena. Democratic debate, which presupposes compromise and the search for intersubjective truth, has been replaced by political communication based on extreme simplification, slogans, and antagonistic rhetoric.

Populist language, as demonstrated by numerous studies (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005), tends to redefine public discourse in a moralistic and binary manner, pitting the 'pure people' against the 'corrupt elites'. According to this logic, the adversary is not an interlocutor with whom to engage in dialogue, but an enemy to be delegitimised. This renders negotiation impractical and undesirable, as it is perceived as a compromise with 'evil'.

This is particularly evident today on social media, which, far from representing simple channels of democratic expression, have produced a profoundly altered communicative ecosystem compared to traditional models of public discussion.

Algorithms optimised for emotional engagement favour polarising content, while the logic of visibility rewards urgency, reaction, and tribal identification. Digital interaction is increasingly taking the form of identity performance, where words are used to strengthen one's sense of belonging rather than to seek common ground. The loss of context and the speed and brevity of messages make it difficult to construct an articulated, negotiated discourse. Public language is thus reduced to a series of statements that exclude listening, rendering negotiation an outdated practice (Couldry, 2023).

Alongside the sensationalisation of language in the media, a contrasting yet equally significant process can be observed: the technicalisation of language within legal, economic, and bureaucratic systems. Although formal and specialised language is necessary in certain areas, it can produce symbolic exclusion when it becomes impermeable to the average citizen.

As Pierre Bourdieu (1991) observes, the ‘symbolic power’ of institutional language lies in its ability to legitimise or delegitimise access to discourse. In this sense, an excess of linguistic codification can hinder democratic negotiation by removing relevant decisions from public debate and relegating them to the realm of technical expertise, which is inaccessible to the public. If we consider the management of the recent Coronavirus pandemic as an example, it represented a paradigmatic moment in the crisis of language.

While there was widespread use of public communication, the institutional language often struggled to be credible and inclusive. In many cases, the language used was authoritarian, unidirectional and technocratic, generating reactions of distrust, denial and radicalisation. The polarisation between ‘deniers’ and ‘scientists’, between those who refused any restriction and those who called for drastic measures, has brought the space of mediation into crisis.

Public discourse has lost its integrative and deliberative function, fully demonstrating the inability of language to serve as a means of reconciling verbal, cultural, and scientific conflicts (Kerr et al., 2021).

The progressive loss of the value of language as a tool for mediation and the construction of shared meaning has consequences that extend beyond communication. It also has a profound effect on the structure of the social bond, democratic stability, and the collective capacity to manage the tensions within complex societies. In this section, we analyse three main sociological consequences: the crisis of trust; the paralysis of decision-making capacity; and the emergence of latent or manifest forms of violence.

As Niklas Luhmann has extensively demonstrated, trust is a structural feature of modern society. It reduces complexity, enabling individuals to act without knowing all the details of the context (Luhmann, *Vertrauen*, 1968). In this context, the public word functions as a vehicle of trust, guaranteeing symbolic continuity between promises, actions, and expectations.

However, when the word loses credibility – whether because it is contradicted by facts, exploited strategically or fragmented by opposing rhetoric – a breakdown in the circuit of social trust occurs. This delegitimation concerns not only those who speak, but also political, scientific and media systems, thereby undermining the very foundations of social cooperation.

When words are no longer capable of generating consensus or regulating conflict, the collective capacity to decide becomes increasingly paralysed.

Instead of being resolved through democratic negotiation, dissent is dismissed, ignored or radicalised. Without a common language, even legitimate dissent can turn into hostility, fuelling a widespread sense of impotence or political passivity. Without shared tools to manage differences, society tends to fragment into impermeable communication niches, each claiming its own truth without seeking common ground.

The result is a ‘symbolic block’ that prevents the development of collective visions and coordinated action (Turkle, 2015; Tota, 2020).

When language fails in its regulatory and negotiating role, violence – whether symbolic or physical – becomes the only means of expressing conflict. As Hannah Arendt (1969) argued, violence usually occurs when words are no longer effective; it is not a continuation of dialogue by other means, but a sign of its failure. This applies to both social dynamics, such as protests not mediated by representation or discourse, and the individual dimension, where communicative frustration can lead to verbal or behavioural aggression.

Therefore, the loss of negotiation is not only a theoretical or institutional problem; it poses a concrete risk of instability and social fracture.

Ultimately, a crisis in communication can lead to an even more pervasive form of social dysfunction: public mutism, or the refusal to engage in public discourse.

When citizens perceive that speech is ineffective and does not produce change or recognition, they withdraw from public spaces, contributing to democratic disaffection. In this context, silence is not a form of listening, but a sign of distrust and resignation. Words without value are not acts, but noise. In a society of constant noise, silence is not openness, but closure (Tota, 2020).

4.1 Case study: the Russian–Ukrainian conflict as a failure of speech and negotiation

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the culmination of a long diplomatic and communicative crisis, and represents the degeneration of this crisis into total war.

In light of the analyses developed in this contribution, it can be read as a paradigmatic case of the exhaustion of the negotiating power of words in contemporary international contexts.

The tensions between Russia and the West, and between Russia and Ukraine did not arise in 2022; they are rooted in a trajectory of misunderstandings, narrative rivalries, and discursive fractures dating back to at least the years following the end of the Cold War.

From NATO’s expansion eastwards and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine to the Euromaidan events (2013-2014) and Russia’s annexation of

Crimea, the symbolic basis for dialogue has gradually eroded. Each event has been interpreted within irreconcilable discursive frameworks, making negotiation based on shared meanings increasingly difficult.

As hostilities began, the conflict produced a linguistic escalation that mirrored the military one. Words ceased to be instruments of diplomacy and became rhetorical weapons. Official speeches on both sides took on absolutist, moralistic and often apocalyptic tones, with talk of ‘denazification’, ‘resistance against evil’, ‘fighting for civilisation’ and the ‘end of the Russian empire’. Such rhetoric does not favour compromise, but rather solidifies identity positions.

As the Habermasian paradigm highlights, when words are no longer used to seek understanding, but rather to achieve a symbolic victory, dialogue becomes impossible (Lombardi, 2023).

The conflict also saw the beginning of a global information war, in which media language was manipulated and militarised. Fake news, censorship, propaganda, disinformation and social media campaigns have contributed to the erosion of trust in public discourse. In this sense, the digital ecosystem has amplified the fracture; reality itself is being narrated in radically different ways, creating parallel symbolic universes.

Once again, words have ceased to unite and have become a factor of disintegration.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect is that, in the absence of words capable of reopening debate, war itself becomes a form of communication, albeit an extreme one. As Michel Foucault stated, war is not only the continuation of politics by other means; in certain cases, it becomes the only remaining form of communication. In this case, diplomacy appears as empty or ritualistic rhetoric, incapable of inverting the binary logic of conflict.

Applying Magatti and Giaccardi’s concept of “generative speech”, we can ask ourselves what type of language – currently absent – could reopen the space for negotiation.

We need a word that is neither neutral nor bellicose, but relational, symbolic, responsible: a word that recognizes the suffering, the complexity, the plurality of historical memories. In the absence of this word, peace remains an abstract discourse, incapable of being pronounced.

4.2 Case Study II: The Israel-Gaza Conflict and the Impossibility of Shared Language

The conflict between Israel and Gaza, which escalated into extreme violence on 7 October 2023, is one of the most dramatic examples of the contemporary inability of words to mediate.

In a context marked by decades of violence, occupation, attacks and repression, the international public discourse has appeared polarised and incapable of establishing a neutral space for dialogue. This case clearly illustrates the consequences of losing a shared vocabulary, where words do not generate understanding but instead exacerbate conflict (Buoncompagni, 2024).

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is also, and perhaps above all, a conflict of historical narratives, in which words such as ‘land’, ‘resistance’, ‘terrorism’, ‘security’ and ‘genocide’ are loaded with incompatible meanings. Collective identities are defined in opposition, and any attempt at linguistic neutrality is perceived as a betrayal.

Rather than creating bridges, words become markers of the field. As Edward Said observes in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), in colonial and post-colonial contexts, language is part of the struggle to define reality.

This conflict was immediately reflected in the global public sphere, producing a polarisation that almost mirrors that already observed in the Russian–Ukrainian case. The Western discursive universe has fragmented into opposing sides, delegitimising the possibility of an intermediate position.

Those who call for a ceasefire are accused of anti-Semitism, while those who denounce Hamas are accused of ignoring Palestinian suffering. Consequently, public discussion loses any deliberative dimension, instead becoming a clash of incompatible moral frameworks (Lombardi, 2023).

Even great institutions such as the UN, the EU and the Vatican have demonstrated their discursive impotence. Their appeals, often formulated in bureaucratic or euphemistic language, are perceived as empty or hypocritical by both sides. This demonstrates that, in the absence of preliminary trust, institutions are not recognised as significant and are unable to produce effects in reality. The language of diplomacy thus appears tired and inadequate to the depth of pain and symbolic fractures.

One of the most profound effects of the crisis of language in this conflict is the impossibility of shared public mourning. Every death is recounted by only one side and every instance of suffering is exploited to bolster one’s own narrative.

Words do not serve to mourn together, but rather to strengthen divided identities. In many contexts, there has been explicit or implicit censorship: words such as ‘genocide’, ‘right to resistance’, ‘occupation’ and ‘right to security’ have become taboo or can only be used in a partisan way. Words that could open up empathy are therefore systematically removed or manipulated.

From a generative linguistic perspective, it is necessary to question what language can constitute a first step towards escaping symbolic conflict today. This is not only a political issue, but also a semiotic and anthropological one. Until we recognise the partial validity of others’ speech and accept the

coexistence of memories and wounds, every word will continue to be an instrument of exclusion.

From this perspective, peace can only be achieved through a pedagogy of recognition – a long, fragile but essential process in which words become a means of connection rather than a weapon. With this second case, the central idea of the paper is strengthened: without a word that knows how to negotiate meaning, conflict becomes structural and society disintegrates.

5. Conclusion: for a rehabilitation of the word as a common good

This reflection concludes the analysis of ongoing dynamics and prepares the ground for the paper's conclusion, which will focus on potential sociological and cultural rethinking of words as common goods.

Throughout this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate how the word, when considered not merely as a means of communication, but also as a symbolic foundation of social cohesion, is currently experiencing a profound crisis. This crisis is not merely a linguistic issue; it affects the very heart of democratic coexistence: the ability to create shared meanings, peacefully manage dissent and collectively deliberate on the future. The digital public sphere, marked by discursive polarisation, media spectacularisation and institutional technicalisation, seems to have reached a point of exhaustion in terms of negotiation, which we understand as a dialogical and relational practice.

Through a theoretical and sociological analysis, we have highlighted how the decline of the generative and responsible word has three critical outcomes: the fracture of the trust circuit, the paralysis of collective planning, and the risk of conflict not symbolically processed. Reflection on the possibility of restoring the value of words as a common good – words that can inform, transform and unite – is urgently needed.

The first step is educational and involves training citizens in discursive responsibility. Words are not neutral acts; they build or destroy bonds and open or close worlds. Teaching respect, active listening and complexity in the family, at school and in the media lays the foundations for a new ethics of language.

A second level is the institutional one.

We need to reconsider the spaces and forms of public debate, removing them from technocracy and identity politics. The quality of democratic discourse must once again be used to evaluate political and media action. This requires investment in language: making it more comprehensible, accessible and truthful.

Finally, on a symbolic and cultural level, we must rediscover the generative power of words, as indicated by Magatti and Giaccardi: their capacity to 'make the world', open up possibilities and generate trust. In an era of

widespread mistrust, words can still be a founding act if they are imbued with responsibility, otherness and vision.

Recovering the power of the word does not mean going backwards, but moving forward towards a new form of modernity: a dialogical modernity which recognises difference as an opportunity for shared meaning-making, not a threat. From this perspective, words are not merely a means to an end, but an end in themselves.

In order to remain democratic, a society must have faith in words and take care of them, allowing them to be rehabilitated socially based on the structural and socio-cultural characteristics of the current time.

As well as the media and institutions, we citizens also have a responsibility.

Firstly, we must educate ourselves to avoid exposing ourselves to everything. We should check sources before turning on the television or entering social media. We should also learn to alternate confusion and noise with silence and reflection. We must also remember that we are lost when we are isolated.

Discernment is always the result of a community of practice, an associative life and a participatory experience.

Reality can be interpreted together. Only with others can we test the words we use, as well as the words of those who too often seek to deceive us. In order to save democracy, we need a new ecology of words.

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