

Stefania Porcelli

## Language and Violence: Hannah Arendt and the American Sixties

*Words can be relied on only if one is sure that their function is to reveal and not to conceal.<sup>1</sup>*

Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* (written in 1969) is an outstanding example of the strict connection between her philosophical reflections and her analysis of the social and political circumstances she lived in, from both the U.S. and the international perspective. As Arendt puts it:

These reflections were provoked by the events and debates of the last few years as seen against the background of the twentieth century, which has become indeed, as Lenin predicted, a century of wars and revolutions, hence a century of that violence which is currently believed to be their common denominator. (*OV* 3)

The book considers the atmosphere in America in the period between World War II and the Vietnam War, including the upheavals in the universities, where Arendt taught Political Sciences between 1955 and 1968. Yet, because of its focus on the general course of twentieth-century wars and revolutions, *On Violence* can also be seen as an essay of political theory. Its incipit recalls the beginning<sup>2</sup> of Arendt's previous book, *On Revolution* (1963) – more specifically dealing with the concepts of freedom and “political happiness” – which, I think, should be read jointly with *On Violence*.

The aim of this paper is, however, to underscore a third dimension in Arendt's essay, one that intermingles and fuses with the other two throughout the book: i.e. her analysis of language and language structures. Such analysis, I will argue, anticipates contemporary linguistic debates about the militaristic metaphors used in ordinary speech as well as studies about violence *per se*. Works about war, Arendt points out, are numerous, but they never deal with violence as such (*OV* 8). On the other hand, the first systematic investigations on the nature and function of metaphors in language and thought appear around 1980. George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* is, according to one of its authors, “[t]he first book outlining the contemporary theory of metaphor” (Lakoff 1992).

Looking at the American society in the Sixties, Arendt highlights the reversal from the non-violent philosophy of the early civil-rights movement to the rhetoric of violence typical of new political groups, for instance the Black Power. “The first generation to grow up under the shadow of the atom bomb” (OV 14) has learnt about concentration camps, crimes against humanity, the massacre of civilians during the last war. Hence the rejection of any use of violence. These first pacifist groups have been followed by the movement against the Vietnam War. On the contrary, the new generation has turned towards a new idea of power. The rhetoric of the New Left is based more on Mao Tse-tung’s axiom that “power grows out of the barrel of a gun” (OV 11) than on Marx’s theory, in which violence is described as playing only a secondary role in history.

In spite of the common use of these words, “violence” is indeed different from “power”, as it appears from Arendt’s first important linguistic specification. In the second part of her book, she makes a clear distinction among the terms “power”, “strength”, “force”, “authority”, and “violence”, in order to distinguish the struggle for civil rights from the pull towards destruction:

To use them as synonyms not only indicates a certain deafness to linguistic meanings, which would be serious enough, but it has also resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities they correspond to. (OV 43)

“Power” and “violence” are held to be synonyms, because they have the same function, i.e. to indicate the means by which man rules over man, but they will appear in their diversity, if one ceases to consider public life as a business of dominion of one or some over others/many (OV 44). According to Arendt,

*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. [...] In current usage, when we speak of a ‘powerful man’ or a ‘powerful personality,’ we already use the word ‘power’ metaphorically, what we refer to without metaphor is ‘strength’. (ibid.)

*Strength* is an individual quality, which can always be overwhelmed by the association of many people, “who often will combine for no other purpose than to ruin strength precisely because of its peculiar independence” (ibid.). *Force* actually refers to nature or natural circumstances, but is never associated with people. *Authority* resides both in the individual

and in institutions and “its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed.” (OV 45). On the other hand, violence is an implement (OV 46): “the extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All.” (OV 42). Since power depends on multitudes, whereas violence is the means used by the few against the many, violence is the opposite of both power and political life, whose specific condition is plurality, as Arendt repeatedly suggests in her works (for example, Arendt 1958, 7; Arendt 1978, 19).

But what about the word “peace”? Like power, and unlike violence, the word indicates not a means, but an end in itself. That’s why the political situation of the Sixties defined “Cold War” cannot be considered “peace”, because it only represents a deterrent from other wars. As Johan Galtung theorized in those years, one has to tell “negative peace” (absence of war) from a positive one, which he defines as “the absence of structural violence” (Galtung 1964, 1969).

Arendt’s interest in language and metaphors is not new: it can be traced back to her analysis of the political space, characterized by action and speech (Arendt 1958, 22). The Greek *polis*, the political space *par excellence*, intends politics as based on persuasion and not upon violence. Regarding the relationship between language and violence, Arendt argues:

The point here is that violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence. Because of this speechlessness political theory has little to say about the phenomenon of violence and must leave its discussion to the technicians. [...] in so far as violence plays a predominant role in wars and revolutions, both occur outside the political realm. (OR 19)

Strictly speaking, wars and revolutions – because of their connection with violence – cannot be a part of the political activity. Violence is mute (Arendt 1958, 26), political life is always a matter of words.<sup>3</sup>

*On Revolution* analyses the metaphoric implication of such words as “revolution”, “persona”, “hypocrite”. Arendt stresses the strong linguistic connection between the natural world and political practice on one hand, and theatre and the political arena on the other. Thus, Arendt underscores – although in an unsystematic way – the double bind between ordinary speech and the language of war, violence, and revolution. The same word “revolution” (from the Latin verb *revolvere*) is a metaphor based on the astronomic concept of the rotation of a planet around its orbit. Another example of metaphor taken from the natural world is Marx’s comparison between the violent outbreaks which precede a revolution and

“the labor pangs that precede, but of course do not cause, the event of organic birth” (OV 11).

*On Revolution* has already mentioned this:

It is quite characteristic that, of the two similes currently used for descriptions and interpretations of revolutions, the organic metaphor has become dear to the historians as well as to the theorists of revolution – Marx, indeed, was very fond of the “birth-pangs of revolution” – while the men who enacted the Revolution preferred to draw their images from the language of the theatre. The profound meaningfulness inherent in the many political metaphors derived from the theatre is perhaps best illustrated by the history of the Latin word *persona*. (OR 106)

The image of natural birth is particularly important with regard to the more recent studies about metaphors and war. As Helen Cooper, Adrienne Munich and Susan Squier put it in 1989:

The epic tradition figures arms as being engendered through the mother by linking making babies and making arms. The pattern of associating a story of arms making with human birth begins in the *Iliad* with the story of Thetis approaching Hephaistos to make weapons for her son, Achilles. (Cooper-Munich-Squier 9)

If war can be thought of as a maternal action and represented through the birth metaphor, it is not surprising that the maternal image has been so often used to glorify and sustain war, above all WWI, both in the propagandistic production and in the literature supporting the conflict.<sup>4</sup> Arendt stresses “[t]he danger of being carried away by the deceptive plausibility of organic metaphors.” This is, she points out, “particularly great where the racial issue is involved” (OV 75). Such metaphors, quite surprisingly, are not only typical of the dominant groups’ language. Indeed, some Black Power adherents believed in racial separation and in the use of violence as well.<sup>5</sup>

The maternal image is just one example of how organic metaphors constantly enter military language. On the other hand, military metaphors figure prominently in everyday speech. As George Lakoff shows, the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR is reflected in our everyday language by a wide variety of expressions:

ARGUMENT IS WAR  
Your claims are *indefensible*.  
He *attacked every weak point* in my argument. His criticisms were *right on target*.  
I *demolished* his argument.  
I’ve never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*. He *shot down* all of my arguments. (Lakoff-Johnson 4)

Since one can actually win or lose an argument, we do not “just *talk* about arguments in terms of war” (ibid.), we actually see the person we are arguing with as an opponent and the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor structures the actions we perform in arguing.

Susan Sontag has analysed the use of military metaphors in connection with AIDS. War and illness have been linked in language, the disease being seen as an invader of the body which has to defend itself. Sontag objects to this DISEASE-AS-WAR metaphor, because

the effect of the military imagery on thinking about sickness and health is far from inconsequential. It overmobilizes, it overdescribes, and it powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatizing of the ill... We are not being invaded. The body is not a battlefield. The ill are neither unavoidable casualties nor the enemy. We – medicine, societies – are not authorized to fight back by any means whatever. (Sontag 183)

As a matter of fact, this language, justifying the attack against the enemy, introduces the us/them dichotomy that structures the identification of the self in opposition to the other.

If, as Lakoff and Turner argue, “metaphors reside in thought, not just in words” (Lakoff-Turner 2), what does this large use of war metaphors mean? Could it mean that our brain naturally thinks in terms of war?<sup>6</sup> And that war is conceivable as a natural event? As discourse analysis has shown, language can further attitudes and conditions which may lead to war. It can also shape enemy images essential to justify ongoing wars. A population’s acceptance of militaristic actions often entails a great linguistic effort by politicians and media. The study of linguistic structures, including syntax, lexicon, and metaphors, reveals what those discourses actually hide, which is usually an ideological conflict between *us* and *them* (Van Dijk 18ff).

As we have seen, both the use of natural metaphor in politics (for instance, the Black Power’s radicalization of the organic issue) and the militarization of organic matters (see the case of diseases seen in term of wars) have the same effect of radicalising a series of oppositions strongly connected with the justification of violence. One of these oppositions, namely the dichotomy friend/enemy, has been used by Carl Schmitt to justify and support Hitler’s totalitarianism and wars.

Yet, Hannah Arendt also stresses that we are not always aware of the sort of words and metaphors we use. As Lakoff and Johnson put it, “our conventional ways of talking about arguments pre-suppose a metaphor we are hardly ever conscious of. The metaphor is not merely in the words we use – it is in our very concept of an argument” (Lakoff-Johnson 6). On the other hand, Arendt makes clear that the language of violence is not a prerogative of extremist groups, but it features highly in pacific activities as well. As a matter of fact, violence has entered the language of leftist humanism and affected its fundamental ideas. Sartre, for example,

is unaware of his basic disagreement with Marx on the question of violence, especially when he states that “irrepressible violence... is man recreating himself [...]. These notions are all the more remarkable because the idea of man creating himself is strictly in the tradition of Hegelian and Marxian thinking; it is in the very basis of all leftist humanism. But according to Hegel man ‘produces’ himself through thought, whereas for Marx, who turned Hegel’s ‘idealism’ upside down, it was labor, the human form of metabolism with nature, that fulfilled this function. (OV 12-13)

The achievement of self-creation has been intended as a non-violent action by both Hegel and Marx. On the contrary, for Sartre the metaphor of birth (“man creating himself”) is associated with violence. Arendt refers to Sartre simply to show that “this new shift toward violence in the thinking of revolutionaries can remain unnoticed even by one of their most representative and articulate spokesmen” (OV 13). Arendt uses Frantz Fanon’s work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Sartre’s introduction to it because of their great influence on the student generation, but acknowledges that Fanon “is much more doubtful about violence than his admirers” (OV 14 n. 19).

However, if the rebels she refers to misinterpret the words of the theorists of the revolution, it is also true that the established power often confuses violent groups with non-violent activists: “sit-ins and occupations of buildings are not the same as arson or armed revolt, and the difference is not one of degree” (OV 91, appendix III). Again the organic metaphor rightly appears, now applied to society:

Nothing, in my opinion, could be theoretically more dangerous than the tradition of organic thought in political matters by which power and violence are interpreted in biological terms. [...] The organic metaphors with which our entire present discussion of these matters, especially of the riots, is permeated – the notion of a ‘sick society’, of which riots are symptoms, as fever is a symptom of disease – can only promote violence in the end. (OV 75)

A case in point here is the reaction of the police to the Berkeley upheavals in 1969. The students' fight for the transformation of an empty building in a "People's Park" ended up with the killing of a student, the blinding of a carpenter and the wounding of more than 120 people. The then Governor of California Ronald Reagan had sent the National Guard troops against a group of non-violent rebels.

The students' revolt – based on different claims in every country, but spread all over the world – shows the frustration of not being able to act, in the political sense that Arendt gives to the word "action", namely the beginning of something new. In their desire to be politically active, the rebels mistake violence for real action. Yet, the only analogy between the two is that "[t]he practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world." (OV 80)

The younger generation turns to those that Arendt calls "prophets" of violence – Mao Tse-tung, Jean Paul Sartre, George Sorel, and a misinterpreted Marx – also because they are overwhelmed and disappointed by the chess game between the superpowers involved in the Cold War. Thus, in dealing with the American attitude to violence, Arendt makes the connection with the international political arena as well, shaped as it is by the contraposition between the two blocs. The students' revolts coincide with the rise of the nuclear age, when the progress of science does not correspond anymore to the progress of mankind:

No doubt the emphasis on the sheer faculty of living, and hence of love-making as life's most glorious manifestation, is a response to the real possibility of constructing a doomsday machine and destroying all life on earth. (OV 74)

However, despite their incredible strength in military and scientific fields, the United States could not establish their power in a country as small as Vietnam. Lack of power, according to Arendt, always means increasing violence. America, as a matter of fact, cannot use all its military potential, as it would lead to total destruction. The old war theories have indeed become obsolete. For instance, the use of Clausewitz's old definition of war as the continuation of politics by other means is no longer possible in the Sixties. As Arendt argues, a new war could only mean "universal suicide" (OV 12). In his analysis of the first Gulf War rhetoric, Lakoff confirms that Clausewitz's definition must be understood as a mere metaphor:

Clausewitz's metaphor is commonly seen as literally true. We are now in a position to see exactly what makes it metaphorical. First, it uses the State-as-Person metaphor. Second, it turns qualitative effects on human beings into quantifiable costs and gains, thus seeing political action as economics. Third, it sees rationality as profit-making. Fourth, it sees war in terms of only one dimension of war, that of political expediency, which is in turn conceptualized as business. (Lakoff 1991)

On the other hand, the situation of non-belligerency with the Soviet Union in the Sixties represents, according to Arendt, nothing more than "the continuation of war by other means" (OV 11). Far from Galtung's positive peace, this "nuclear peace" (Schäffner 80) could be better defined as "ostensible peace", with the unique function of avoiding conflicts without constructing a non-violent society. According to Arendt, on the contrary, peace is not a means, but an end in itself, just like power.

Arendt's rejection of the use of metaphors in the political scenario does not entail a refusal of metaphorical language as such. She recognizes the great role metaphors play in the conceptualisation of abstract situations and models:

Language, by lending itself to metaphorical usage, enables us to think, that is, to have traffic with non-sensory matters, because it permits a carrying-over, *metapherein*, of our sense experiences. There are not two worlds because metaphor unites them. (Arendt 1978, 110)

Lakoff totally subscribes to this idea, for example when he writes:

Abstractions and enormously complex situations are routinely understood via metaphor. Indeed, there is an extensive, and mostly unconscious, system of metaphor that we use automatically and unreflectively to understand complexities and abstractions. (Lakoff 1991)

"Metaphors can kill" (ibid.) only because metaphorical discourse can support war action. It is "metaphors backed up by bombs" (ibid.) that can actually kill. On the other hand, Lakoff asserts:

There is no way to avoid metaphorical thought, especially in complex matters like foreign policy. I am therefore not objecting to the use of metaphor in itself in foreign policy discourse. My objections are, first, to the ignorance of the presence of metaphor in foreign policy deliberations, second, to the failure to look systematically at what our metaphors hide, and third, to the failure to think imaginatively about what new metaphors might be more benign. (ibid.)

Nowadays, linguistic scholars know much about the way we apply systems of metaphors to understand complexities and abstractions. We need only to encourage the use of different sets of metaphors both in our everyday life and in political discourse, trying “to imagine a culture where arguments are not viewed in terms of war, where no one wins or loses, where there is no sense of attacking or defending, gaining or losing.” (Lakoff-Johnson 4) Of course, a language shift will not be enough to stop either violence or war. Yet, Chilton’s and Lakoff’s “re-metaphorizing”<sup>7</sup> (Chilton-Lakoff 58) or Anita Wenden’s “Critical Language Education” (Wenden 213ff) could help to develop discourse structures that sustain peace instead of war, cooperation instead of violence, and that respect “the human condition” as Arendt sees it. Although not a linguistics scholar, Hannah Arendt has effectively acknowledged the intermediate role language always plays between political theories and social events, and her deductions may be profitably applied not only to the American Sixties.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, New York: Harvest, 1970, p. 66. Hereafter *OV*.

<sup>2</sup> “Wars and revolutions – as though events had only hurried up to fulfil Lenin’s early prediction – have thus far determined the physiognomy of the twentieth century. And as distinguished from the nineteenth-century ideologies – such as nationalism and internationalism, capitalism and imperialism, socialism and communism, which, though still invoked by many as justifying causes, have lost contact with the major realities of our world – war and revolution still constitute its two central political issues.” Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London: Penguin, 1990, p. 11, hereafter *OR*.

<sup>3</sup> Yet, Arendt is aware that the theoretical distinction is hardly reflected in the real world, where violence and power never occur in a pure state. See *OV* 47.

<sup>4</sup> With regard to English literature, see on this subject D. A. Boxwell, “The (M)Other Battle of World War One: The Maternal Politics of Pacifism in Rose Macaulay’s *Non-Combatants and Others*”, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, vol. 12, n. 1 (Spring 1993), 85-101. On the relationship between war and literature, see Giorgio Mariani, “Tra Omero e l’America”, introduction to *Le parole e le armi: saggi su guerra e violenza nella cultura e letteratura degli stati uniti d’America*, Milano: Marcos y Marcos, 13-53.

<sup>5</sup> Such positions were in contrast with those of the Civil Rights Movement. Yet, the two groups were not always antagonistic, as it might appear from Arendt’s criticism of the Black Power, and not every adherent to the latter would sustain violent activism. Indeed, some people or groups participated in both movements.

<sup>6</sup> The *Seville Statement on Violence*, written by an international team of specialists in 1986 and adopted by UNESCO in 1989, states that “modern war is not a matter of emotion so much as the institutional use of obedience, suggestibility, idealism and social skills, such as language... traits of violence are exaggerated in the training of soldiers and in the preparation of support for war in the general populations.” (quoted in Wenden 212)

<sup>7</sup> “The possibilities for change are limited by our everyday metaphors. What can be changed, however, are the theorist’s elaborations of the folk metaphors. Among the things that policy makers can do is to find new metaphorical elaborations that highlight realities that their current metaphors hide.” (Chilton-Lakoff 57)

## Works cited

- Arendt, Hannah (1958), *The Human Condition*, Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- (1963), *On Revolution*, London: Penguin, 1990.
- (1969), *On Violence*, New York: Harvest, 1970.
- (1978), *The Life of the Mind – One/Thinking, Two/Willing*, New York-London: Harvest/HJB Book.
- Chilton, Paul, George Lakoff (1995), “Foreign Policy by Metaphor”, in Christina Schäffner, Anita L. Wenden, eds. (1995), 37-59.
- Cooper, Helen M., Adrienne Munich, Susanne Merrill Squier (1989), “Arms and the Woman: The Con[tra]ception of the War Text”, in *Arms and the Woman. Gender, and Literary Representation*, Chapel Hill-London: The University of North Carolina Press, 9-24.
- Galtung, Johan (1964), “Editorial”, in *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1-4.
- (1969), “Violence, Peace and Peace Research”, in *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. VI, no. 3, 167-192, later in Johan Galtung, *Peace: Research, Education, Action. Essays in Peace Research*, vol. I, Copenhagen, Christian Ejlertsen, 1975, 109-134.
- Lakoff, George (1991), “Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf”, distributed via electronic bulletin boards, January, 1991. Reprinted in Brian Hallett (ed.), *Engulfed in War: Just War and the Persian Gulf*, Honolulu: Matsunaga Institute for Peace, 1991, article also available on the internet at [http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Texts/Scholarly/Lakoff\\_Gulf\\_Metaphor\\_1.html](http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Texts/Scholarly/Lakoff_Gulf_Metaphor_1.html).
- (1992) “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor”, in Andrew Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought* (2nd edition), Cambridge University Press, 1993, 202-251. Available on the internet at [http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~market/semiotic/lkof\\_met.html](http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~market/semiotic/lkof_met.html)
- Lakoff, George, Mark Johnson (1980), *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Lakoff, George, Mark Turner (1989), *More than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mariani, Giorgio (1999), “Tra Omero e l’America”, introduction to Giorgio Mariani, ed., *Le parole e le armi: saggi su guerra e violenza nella cultura e letteratura degli stati uniti d’America*, Milano: Marcos y Marcos, 13-53.
- Schäffner, Christina, Anita L. Wenden, eds. (1995), *Language and Peace*, Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Company.
- Schmitt, Carl (1932), *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George D. Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Original publication: *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 1927, 2nd edition 1932.

Sontag, Susan (1990), *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*, Doubleday: Anchor Books.

Van Dijk, Teun A. (1995), “Discourse Analysis as Ideology Analysis”, in Christina Schäffner, Anita L. Wenden, eds. (1995), 17-33.

Wenden, Anita L., “Critical Language Education”, in Christina Schäffner, Anita L. Wenden, eds. (1995), 211-227.