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On the taming the space of dialogue by deaf people during the COVID-19 pandemic

O oswajaniu przestrzeni dialogu przez osoby głuche w czasach pandemii COVID-19¹

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But if you tame me, my life will be filled with sunshine.
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Abstract: The article is empirical. The aim of the research was to diagnose the specificity of subjective experiences related to the impact of a pandemic situation on the shaping of the dialogical space. The focus was on the following problem: how do deaf people perceive their experiences of creating a space where authentic dialogue takes place? The research used the method of individual cases. The analysis of empirical material obtained on the basis of a narrative interview with deaf students allowed us to learn about their experiences and personal experiences related to the creation of a space in which dialogue takes place in a pandemic situation. Qualitative analysis showed three areas discussed by the respondents, these were reflections on: dialogue as a form of communication, the subject of dialogue and the value of dialogue. The collected narratives revealed emotional experiences that influenced the interpretation of events by deaf students.

Keywords: deaf person, dialogue, dialogue space

Abstrakt: Artykuł ma charakter empiryczny. Celem zrealizowanych badań było poznanie specyfiki subiektywnych przeżyć związanych z wpływem sytuacji pandemicznej na kształtowanie przestrzeni dialogowej. Skoncentrowano się na następującym problemie: jak osoby głuche postrzegają swoje doświadczenia związane z tworzeniem przestrzeni, w której odbywa się autentyczny dialog? W badaniach wykorzystano metodę indywidualnych przypadków. Analiza materiału empirycznego uzyskana na podstawie wywiadu narracyjnego z głuchymi studentkami pozwoliła na poznanie ich doświadczeń, osobistych przeżyć związanych z tworzeniem przestrzeni, w której odbywa się dialog w sytuacji pandemicznej. Analiza jakościowa odzwierciedliła trzy obszary omawiane przez osoby badane, były to refleksje dotyczące: dialogu jako formy komunikacji, podmiotu dialogu i wartości dialogu. W zebranych narracjach ujawniły się przeżycia emocjonalne, które wyraźnie rzutowały na interpretację zdarzeń przez głuche studentki.

Słowa kluczowe: osoba głucha, dialog, przestrzeń dialogowa

1. Introduction

Is dialogue becoming less relevant in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic? On the contrary, today its essence and significance resound in a special way. This new life

¹ Polska wersja: <https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/Presentations0/2021-3-Plut.pdf>

experience shows the drama of human existence, reminds us of the brutal lesson of the truth about our existence, about the helplessness, not only of people but also of systems. The natural reaction to address this existential situation was to hide and thus neglect direct interactions of the encounter with the other person. Understanding, knowing and experiencing the otherness of functioning in a different, pandemic reality has become troublesome and even unpleasant. Man expects to come out of the isolation in which he had to hide temporarily. Obviously, the contemporary media technology, the global infrastructure has significantly widened the possibility of interpersonal communication by proposing a modification of the quality and quantity of social relations, thus creating a wider context for effecting a dialogue. There has been a change in the model of the structures of interpersonal relations; the group model based on community has been replaced by a network model.² Unfortunately, interactions made through digital space create an illusion for the formation of a genuine dimension of social communication and interpersonal relations (Borsook, 2000; Cummings, Butler, Kraut, 2002). The use of these latest means of communication perpetuates the network individualism and leads to a seemingly open or deep encounter in a networked community.

While considering connotations of the meaning of the very notion of *dialogue* one should bear in mind the perspectives of representatives of the philosophy of dialogue and of the existential and personalistic thought, which allow noticing open semantic ranges (Gara, 2008). Referring to the etymology of the word 'dialogue' in Greek, the words: *logos* (meaning 'word' and 'speech'), and *dia* (meaning 'through') allows to explain dialogue as a passage through something or movement from one point to another. In the context of the above explanations, dialogue means an exchange of information between at least two interlocutors. Already in ancient times the interpretation of the knowledge about conditions which have to be fulfilled for a dialogue to take place can be found in dialogue theories. The creator of the dialogic method, Socrates, explained that it is only a dialogue that allows one to care for the soul of another person and discover the truth hidden in them. Plato was convinced that the greatest value of dialogue lay in the directness and substantiality of the soul's conversation with itself. Dialogue between man and man became a principle for the first time in the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach. Contemporary dialogists referred to his thesis, criticising the naturalism and atheism of this thinking. He influenced, however, the founder of the philosophy of dialogue, Martin Buber, who understood dialogue as achieving unity with another human being. It was the establishment of a relationship of a personal character that became the starting point of dialogue: I and Thou, and unlike monologue, it constituted and constitutes the only open form of communication (Pelczarska, 2014). Therefore, true dialogue is expressed through partnership and cannot exist without respect, trust and responsibility.

² Barry Wellman (1999, p. 1) proposed the term 'networked society', i.e. society that creates networks of various kinds being the preferred form of organisation.

Participants in a dialogue address each other, on the one hand, with the sincere intention to build reciprocity and, on the other hand, to preserve the actual separateness of matters of importance to each other. For Emmanuel Levinas (and also M. Buber), dialogue leads to mutual understanding, to coming closer to the other person. Its essence is the meeting with 'the Other', going beyond the bubble of egoistic 'I' and creating a new quality of a dialogical relation. The essence of the dialogic relation is thus co-presence understood as co-experiencing and co-loving³ in the perspective of 'the Other'. An in-depth analysis of the idea of a creative, yet dramatic experience of the mutuality of persons was described by Karol Wojtyła in his drama *Radiation of Fatherhood (Promieniowanie ojcostwa)*. Dialogic relations oscillate between meeting and fulfilment and, as the author writes: *'You need to want together. – One cannot evade wanting because then the feeling confuses... and the word 'mine' remains in a kind of vacuum and that is why it hurts...'* (Wojtyła, 2004, p. 282). Józef Tischner (2006) also emphasised the dramatic character of dialogue, assuming that man as a dramatic being *'takes part in the drama ... He cannot live otherwise. His nature is a dramatic time and two openings – an intentional opening towards the stage and a dialogical opening towards another human being'* (Tischner, 2006, p. 10). Therefore, participation in the drama means that dialogical relations may lead to the bond being saved or lost because each of the subjects of the meeting will want to assimilate what is important from their perspective. Genuine dialogue shapes the relationship with the other person, which is so necessary for existence, a personal relationship in which the human being is perceived as a cognitive subject. The individual character and the individual fate of man both express and reveal the quintessence of the essence of dialogue. Understood in this way, dialogue gives meaning to the community of human communication.

The space in which the dialogue between D/deaf people and hearing people takes place requires clarification and understanding of their identity dilemmas. In fact, the quality of their encounter is determined by linguistic and cultural distinctiveness. In definitional terms, the word 'Deaf' (capitalised) refers to the sociocultural issues of being a deaf person as opposed to the word 'deaf' (in lower case) defining the medical nature of the aspect of native lack, impairment or total loss of hearing.⁴ The D/Deaf community is very diverse internally, with individuals who identify with the culture of either hearing people and/or people with varying degrees of hearing impairment. The Deaf community demands to be perceived as a linguistic and cultural minority, to be able to communicate freely and to express their

³ It should be mentioned that already in the ancient account of the title character in Sophocles' drama *Antigone*, a dialogic challenge is formulated. When Antigone says, *'I was born to join in love, not hate – that is my nature'*, she stresses the importance of the ties that bind the family, the social group and advocates dialogue based on a sense of community, mutual kindness and profoundly human truth rooted in the dignity of personal existence.

⁴ It is worth recalling that Paddy Ladd (2003), introduced the term *deafhood* to emphasise the 'nationality of the deaf' (from *nationhood*; as opposed to *deafness* in medical terms).

emotions in a natural, visuospatial and sensorily accessible language, such as Polish Sign Language (PJM). For them, Polish is not only a foreign language of 'foreigners in their own country' but also difficult to learn due to its non-visual-spatial nature (Swidzinski, 2005). It is PJM that allows them to satisfy their own needs: group belonging or acceptance, provides a natural exchange of experiences and establishes a dialogue with people who have similar life experiences. They perceive the different interpretations of identity imposed on them by the hearing community in a subjective and even hostile way. An analysis of the literature on the subject allows the conclusion that d/Deaf people have experienced exclusion and discrimination from hearing people over the past years and, due to this social perception, have become sceptical and distanced from initiatives or suggestions of hearing experts supporting their development (Adamiec, 2003; Zaborniak-Sobczuk, 2009; Podgórska-Jachnik, 2013; Dunaj, 2015). On the other hand, for a group of deaf people and those with varying degrees of hearing impairment, everyday existence in a hearing environment does not present difficulties in social functioning because they function culturally as hearing people. They communicate in Polish and can decide for themselves and participate in various social and cultural initiatives organised by hearing people. They adapt to the cultural and linguistic reality imposed on them and, stepping out of the horizon of human prejudices, enter into dialogue.

2. Methodological basis for the research

The aim of the qualitative research presented here was to explore subjective experiences related to the impact of the pandemic situation on the formation of a dialogical space. The focus was on the following problem: how do deaf people perceive their experiences of creating a space where genuine dialogue takes place?

In order to obtain an answer to the problem question posed, secondary qualitative data analysis was used. This approach made it possible to search for the depth of the phenomenon under study while seeking a new perspective. The research presented used the method of individual cases. The techniques of narrative interview and individual in-depth interview (IDI) were used. The following tools were used: instructions for the interview organising the course and direction of the narrative and a semi-structured IDI questionnaire. The individuals who participated in the research were three deaf female students. The survey was conducted in February 2021. The author met with the ladies remotely using the Microsoft Teams application. Each of those meetings lasted on average about 1.5 hours. The empirical material obtained during the interviews was video-recorded with the prior written consent of the subjects.

3. Characteristics of the subjects

Three female students participated in this research project.⁵ One of them was Maria, who is 21 years old and lives in the Silesian Province. Her hearing loss occurred in the prenatal period and was caused by her mother's illness during pregnancy. Audiometric testing showed a profound bilateral sensorineural hearing loss, namely a hearing loss in the range of 1000-4000 Hz of 90 dB for the right ear and almost 70 dB for the left ear. She received early development support, and at six months of age she underwent a hearing implant surgery and had a hearing implant fitted in her right ear at the Institute of Physiology and Pathology of Hearing in Kajetany. Thanks to systematic auditory and linguistic rehabilitation in a specialist clinic in Katowice, she pursued her education through a system of integrated education. Currently, she is a second-year student of first-cycle studies in social-care pedagogy and family life education at the University of Silesia in Cieszyn. She communicates in Polish but does not know the PJM. Another student who expressed her willingness to participate in the research was Aleksandra. She was born in 2001 and lives in the Małopolskie Province. The cause of her hearing loss is unknown. Thanks to the obligatory screening test performed on the second day of life at the neonatal unit, she was referred to the next level of laryngology and audiology where another hearing test confirmed the diagnosis of hearing impairment. Audiometric testing showed a hearing loss (40 dB for the right ear and more than 90 dB for the left ear in the range of 1000-4000 Hz). In infancy she had a cochlear implant inserted in her left ear, and she wore and is still wearing a hearing aid in her right ear. She received speech therapy for the deaf at a specialist clinic; in addition to this, her parents provided her with other specialist classes for psychological and educational support at home. She first attended a mainstream primary school and then continued her education at an integrated lower and then upper secondary school. Currently she studies preschool and early-school education at the Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Krakow University. Her dominant language of communication is vocal Polish but she also uses the PJM to communicate with deaf people. Another student who agreed to participate in the research was Ewa. She was born in Krakow in 2000 and developed hearing loss in infancy; she contracted meningitis and received ototoxic antibiotics. At the age of eight months, she was diagnosed with a hearing loss of almost 90 dB in her right ear (in the range of 1000-4000 Hz) and 40 dB in her left ear. After the age of one, she received early development support and auditory-verbal therapy. She had a hearing aid implanted in her right ear and wears a hearing aid on her left ear. Ewa completed primary school, lower and

⁵ The author of the paper made a commitment to the female students interviewed that their names would not be disclosed because they wished to remain anonymous: therefore, the first names of the interviewees were changed and their surnames are not given. All statements made by the respondents have been authorised.

upper secondary school in the integrated system. For the last two years, she has been studying advertising and computer graphics at the School of Management and Banking in Krakow. Her dominant language in everyday communication is spoken Polish; she is also fluent in the PJM and is roughly familiar with the manually coded language (SJM).

4. Results of the analysis of the research material

The initial qualitative analysis reflected three areas discussed by the interviewees, i.e. reflections on dialogue as a form of communication, the subject of dialogue and the value of dialogue.

A. Reflections on dialogue as a form of communication concerned categories such as:

The language of dialogue;

The style of dialogic communication.

B. The reflections relating to the subject of dialogue allowed the following categories to be distinguished:

The dialogic man;

I and Thou.

C. Reflections concerning the **value of dialogue** were expressed in categories such as:

Creating the dialogic space;

Searching for the truth about oneself and the world.

Re: A.

The qualitative analysis of the students' statements demonstrates that the dialogues were dominated by conversation in which participants ask each other questions and provide answers. Their roles were not accidental, but clearly defined by the perspective of understanding the intentions, both individually and collectively. Obviously, dialogue is a process, and the specificity of its dynamics was evidenced by such features as spontaneity, the participants' involvement, and the language of dialogue. Dialogue took place not only through words, but also through means of non-verbal communication which became a method of conveying contents considered as important by the actors. The style of communication should build a common space where understanding and agreement of thoughts is evident. Unfortunately, it appears from the ladies' statements that during the COVID-19 pandemic, dialogue did not always contribute to the formation of deep relationships between hearing and deaf people. It appears that the way one speaks is more important than what one speaks about. Here are examples of narratives that illustrate the above categories.

'I have no trouble communicating in Polish. I can talk, ask questions and express myself. I learn from others and they learn from me. I choose my words very carefully when I speak. If I can see

the person I talk to, it's easier for me to engage in a dialogue. I don't impose my point of view, I listen to comments, and I care about reaching common conclusions. However, the pandemic has limited my contacts. I don't meet socially; I don't invite friends to my home due to the advanced age of my parents. We communicate on Skype or Zoom. These are very helpful facilities because they allow you to share your screen, and you can communicate by text, voice or camera image. What can I say about those people on the screen? The dominant style is almost telegraphic; you have to speak sparingly and briefly. In this telegraph form I won't be able to get to know a person; I don't know if they're pretending or "what's in their soul". Is it a real dialogue? Well, no' (Maria).

'In my family home we have a dialogue. Just like in other families, we talk, we argue, we quarrel. We use all possible means, from Polish language to facial expressions and gestures. When my mum stamps her feet, it means that I won't convince her to agree with my opinion. My mum is a hearing person, but she reacts in such a funny way. I'm no chicken when it comes to talking to hearing strangers. I'm not going to pretend it's easy for me to live in the pandemic. I don't understand everything that's going on. But I listen carefully to what takes place on the street, at home and at the university. I am resourceful, I find information online, read the alerts on my phone, and I watch TV. With instant messaging and Facebook, you can communicate and you don't have to meet directly' (Aleksandra).

'Dialogue is a matter of good manners. I'm not afraid of dialogue in Polish or using the PJM. You can see the character of a person in their style of communication. If a hearing or a deaf person is shy or composed, then they speak or sign slowly, show signs calmly. If the person is impetuous, they communicate gestures and signs quickly, hurriedly, but clearly. The voice also signals emotions and disposition. The fact is that there is now the coronavirus pandemic and everyone is wearing masks, their faces are covered and this makes dialogue through facial expressions, body language and spoken language difficult. In this difficult time, we are unable to meet each other, to listen to each other's problems. I communicate a lot online; there are a lot of apps, Instagram, Facebook. The internet really helps with maintaining long distance relationships. These are contacts not only with friends. I often meet new people online. Thanks to the internet, you can have a nice time and there is an opportunity to have a dialogue' (Ewa).

Re: B.

The analysis of the ladies' narratives shows that genuine dialogue requires participation of a human being who is an autonomous subject and represents a certain internal attitude. A dialogic attitude is expressed not only in unveiling yourself, taking off the mask, but also in openness to new, unknown experiences and in sensitivity to others: You, the Other. A proper I-Thou (the Other) relationship will only be true when there is mutual understanding and feeling of empathy for each other. The students emphasised not only the differences between I and You (Thou), but also the unpredictability of the nature of their relationship as a result of varying experiences. The statements presented are an illustration of the category discussed.

'There should be two people in the dialogue. I usually participate in dialogue with hearing people. A hearing person is not always honest. My family, my mum, my dad want to share their experiences, their judgements with me. Yes, they are sincere. I try to be open to the other person, to their thinking. Unfortunately, I find this most difficult to achieve in dialogue with my fellow students. They are not honest. I can see it in their faces. I see their pity, it is a gracious participation. Their facial expressions are emotions. Their emotions are written on their faces. In the pandemic it is even worse. There are additional difficulties now. I am good at lip reading. When a person has a visor, it is easier for me to read the message even though the voice is a bit distorted. A face mask suppresses the voice very much; I can only see the eyes. The eyes will not show the content. We look at each other like that, we don't talk, I don't even know if we smile at each other' (Maria).

'I see the hearing people's fear during a dialogue. Who are they? Hearing friends at the secondary school, college friends, the lady at the post office, at the doctor's surgery. They have attitudes that show stereotypes about me as a deaf person. I overheard a conversation between hearing girls at university. It was in the toilet, they didn't know I was there. That deaf one, they said, is held down, she mutters and doesn't speak; oh, she's do irritable; the professors will go easy on her, they treat her better than the rest of us. It was unfair. Maybe this pandemic is good because I don't have to try to get help from hearing people. Please, understand when your face is covered I don't know what they are talking about. A plexiglass shield on a shop counter or at a reception desk makes it difficult for me to read a command or a question. Lecturers have moustaches and beards, and they speak fast. The good thing about classes in the pandemic is that lecturers prepare presentations and send notes to students' (Aleksandra).

'A question about a person who is in dialogue is a very wise question. There should be a minimum of two in a dialogue. Each of them should be sincere, and recognise your dignity and have respect themselves. I know who I am, and that gives me the strength not to be humiliated. If the hearing one is not sincere, I ask myself, why should I be sincere? Why should I talk about myself? Why should the hearing one only find out about my experiences? The way I see it, in order to have a dialogue, you have to be really together in a genuine way. You need to live in truth as we see it' (Ewa).

Re: C.

The research participants' reflections on the value of dialogue stemmed from their experiences of interacting with hearing people and allowed them to explore and understand the meaning. Their constructing of a space for dialogue is closely related to their functioning 'here and now', to their activity in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflected in their narratives is the specificity of their personal baggage of experience. In fact, sincere and deep dialogic relationships can open a person to the problems of others and bring them closer to one another. The low level of knowledge among hearing people about the impact of hearing impairment on human functioning, as signalled by the deaf students, is significant so that the

weight of these relationships is clearly shifted in the dialogue space to the side of the environment whose culture has the dominant dimension. Here are some sample narratives:

'For me, what matters most is a dialogue where I can share experiences, talk about intimate matters and be sure that I will get a helping hand. And reciprocally, I will give the same. If we trust each other then we can rely on each other. Even despite the various obstacles caused by COVID-19. Sure, there are people with whom I have better or worse rapport. Better with my mum and worse with my dad. It depends on them and on me. As for my hearing friends, we are also different. We think, feel and see the world differently. They are behind in their knowledge on deaf people. They stopped long ago when deaf people were not rehabilitated or provided with hearing implants at an early age. The implant gave me a new lease of life; with it I can hear well, and under normal conditions I have no problems communicating' (Maria).

'This terrible disease has knocked us out of normal life; I don't feel safe. Now I understand how important dialogue is. We were condemned to live from day to day; our plans were suspended. It was a shock. When it started, over a year ago, I talked a lot with my mother and my sister. About wanting to live, to be in good health; and there were also sad conversations about death. If it wasn't for my family, it would be hard for me to cope. I can't rely on hearing friends or acquaintances (Aleksandra).

'The value of dialogue is getting to know yourself and the person you are talking to. It doesn't matter if they are Polish, Slovak, old or young. You have to talk about what is important, what you are afraid of. COVID is an unexpected thing. I have some apps that enable me to have a dialogue with anyone. I can do some very good chatting with a new friend. I think deaf people really want their education to be based on dialogue. There is a folk saying, 'He that is full will not understand him that is hungry'. We belong to two different worlds and there are things that divide us. Yes, there are friends, hearing friends who try to understand me. It's a nice feeling when I talk to her and I can see that she is surprised and even happy because she has learned so much about deaf people' (Ewa).

Concluding reflections

The analysis of the empirical material obtained from the narrative interviews with deaf students made it possible to learn about their personal experiences related to the creation of a space where dialogue takes place in the pandemic situation. The collected narratives revealed deep reflections prompting contemplation and thoughtful action. A very important space of dialogue for the respondents is the microsystem, specifically the hearing parents. They remain with each other in a system of relatively fixed, prototypical relationships that determine the quality and intensity of the dialogue that takes place. They know each other and use signals developed by them to convey specific information or meanings. An additional factor implying the intensity and permanence of dialogic relations during the COVID-19 pandemic is the fact that they live together and meet every day. In the present context, the whole spectrum of non-verbal communicators, conveyed through

gestures, proxemics, and of course the means of communication associated with the space in which the dialogue takes place, are all relevant. Positive educational attitudes represented by the parents of the respondents additionally allow the building of deep relations between them based on emotional closeness and foster the satisfaction of the need for support, so important in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dialogue does not exist without a personal relationship; it is a process that requires time, persistence and effort. Shared experiences, family events, attachment and emotional closeness have influenced the development of a space for dialogue in which they can express their opinion.

Unfortunately, it appears from the respondents' statements that by functioning away from the community of hearing students, they do not build a common dialogic space. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that the dialogue between deaf female students and their hearing colleagues does not take on the dimension of mutual socialisation on a cognitive, emotional and social level. In their relations, the boundaries are clear enough to protect privacy and maintain a sense of separateness. The taming of the space for dialogue will be hampered if there is no genuine turning towards each other, understanding of the person in the human being, as well as an expression of personal feelings, thoughts and behaviour. Then a dialogue is accomplished, which *'is not idle and random chatter, but strenuous and at the same time extremely interesting creative work'* (Kępiński, 2009, p. 43).

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