THE LANGUAGE OF EYES – A FEMININE DISCOURSE OF VISION IN THE 18TH CENTURY NOVEL

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***Abstract*:** *Reading the mind through the body is an activity we are all involved in all the time. The huge amount of information sent through the body signals consciously or not represents an extremely important source of significance for the participants to the process of communication. The eyes represent an important element of the body language and they have an important role in coding and decoding messages transmitted by the sentimental characters.*

***Keywords*:** *non-verbal communication, eyes, sentimental novel, signs, emotions*.

Verbal communication vs. non verbal communication

When two persons meet each other, or especially when they are able to perceive themselves, the respective individuals deliver mutually an important exchange of different signs. Their status and task, their culture and environment will play a significant role in decoding voluntarily or involuntarily, correctly or incorrectly the messages. A big number of information will be immediately perceived and decoded, but there are more which will definitely escape to this process as they are spontaneous and unconscious.

Some reports state that the understanding of a message is managed in a proportion of 50% - 80% through the non verbal channel and only in a proportion of 20% - 50% through the verbal one. It is obvious that the communication is both verbal and non verbal, and between the individuals appear, on the non verbal side, some exchanges as important as those provided by means of words. This happens because the non verbal communication, bodily expressed in most cases, escapes from the rational or conscious control.

Signs and signals

The structure of this type of communication comprises a system of *signs* and *signals*, codes and transmission channels. The physical and material *sign* has got a signifier: a concept, a logical function. The sign bears a message. It is always a sign of something. In the view of Umberto Eco (1996; 12), the sign is a figurative entity or not, by convention or because of its typical features, represents a value, an objective or a concept. It is used for transmitting information in order to express or to indicate a certain thing that somebody knows and wants that others find out.

The signs can be classified into:

1) Natural signs (indications): the smoke is the sign of the existence of fire
2) Artificial signs (icons and symbols): certain traffic signs, the dove is the symbol of peace etc.

The non-verbal communication is accomplished by means of signs and signals. There are some writers who consider these concepts being different and prefer to analyse the signs. (J.K, Burgoon, D.B. Buller and W.G. Woodall, 1996). On the contrary, F. Birkenbihl (1999) uses only the term of *signal* when she analyse the body language. In his turn S. Chelcea (2004) considers that both terms can be used separately

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and recommends the usage of *signal* for a non verbal behavior and the term *sign* when we refer, for example, to the stereotypes, artifacts or to the smell of our body.

According to S. Chelcea, there are two types of signals:

a) Discrete (or digital): the type of *on/off*, meaning the presence/ absence, yes/no *etc.*
b) Gradual (analogical) referring to the intensity.

In a non verbal communication, there is a distinction between the *signals* and the *metasignals.* The latter type refers to the signals which change their significance when are associated with others. The *sight* and the *smile* are metasignals and their presence with other gestures can signify sympathy or antipathy.

Both signals belong to the same part of the body, the face, where most of our emotions are expressed: eyes and mouth. The face organs accomplish a lot of the vital human functions: speak, eat, taste, fell, see, hear, and touch. Francois Flahault (1989; 112) considers the face being the most speaking of all and the movements of the face generate a language. The term of *expression* refers to the face movements which are attached to some feelings or emotions. In the D.G. Leathers point of view the face communication has a superior potential than the verbal communication.

Eyes

We can speak about the importance of eyes in the context of seduction – the expression of seduction. Here is an example of justification of the role of eyes in an action of seduction: a girl is looking to a boy until she catches his attention; then she changes her sight and smile slightly; she generally maintains a visual contact. The girl glances again the man and this time smiles widely.

We can say that the function of the eyes has an affective nature besides others: attention, persuasion, regulation, power, impression.

The word *visage* comes from the Latin *visus* which means *eyesight.* Maybe this is because the eyes occupy an important place on the face, being a central element of the face in decoding the emotions. Looking at someone means giving all the attention to respective person. It is often said about eyes: *smiling eyes, shy eyes, blinking eyes, catching someone's eyes, eyes fixed, read happiness into someone eyes etc. All these expressions concern different types of regarding a person, the regard being influenced by the dilatation of the pupils.*

The eyes occupy a privileged position in the register of non verbal decoding because through this means are transmitted 87% of information from the environment. In his book, Les yeux qui trahissent (The eyes that betray) (1975), E. Hess states that in all the non verbal communication, the eyes provide the most honest and exact signals because they take up a privileged focal place on the body and the pupils function independently. Furthermore, the modification of the pupils is adjusted involuntarily, according o the fluctuation of the light, but also to the mood of the respective person. Under the influence of the light, the pupils of an individual dilate and the same phenomenon occurs in the conditions of a change in mood or disposition of a person from positive to negative or inversely. A negative mood, like boredom or anger, leads to a contraction of the pupils while the happiness, more particularly the love pleasure, produces a dilatation.

The eyes communicate the most honest message about somebody's thoughts. It is not said without any reason to look into somebody eyes when you have a conversation; you can look his/her pupils which can be the proof of the interlocutor's honesty. Nervous or shy persons look too little his/her interlocutor or avoid someone's eyes. If somebody lies or hides some information, his eyes will meet the interlocutor

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only one third of the total time spent together. If someone's eyes meet someone else's eyes for more than two thirds this could mean that the former person is either interested in the second or he find the other attractive.

Duration in terms of eye contact can be translated in terms of signal of affective attraction, the mutual glances having a positive attitude. The attractive power of the eyes, says Corraze, takes place in a generally sympathetic environment or in a particularly erotic one.

Here we can discuss also about the cultural differences in the comprehension of the significance of eyes or the duration of glances and about the historical periods when people each other. Couples in the eighteen century behave differently in face-to-face interaction than couples nowadays.

During the eighteenth century, particularly, it was a highly conscious process, and the different languages of the body were not only being translated and analysed by the experts, but eagerly learned and interpreted by a growing population of keen and knowledgeable amateurs. The truth or otherwise of the doctrines of physiognomy – the study of the stable structures of face and body as indicators of lasting characteristics of the mind and soul – was hotly debated by laymen as well as by men of science and specialists in anatomy. Non verbal communication, which involves gestures, poses and facial expressions reveal temporary states of mind, was accepted as a basic premise, but widely discussed as to just what each facial and bodily motion meant, how to translate it, and how it imitate it.

The non verbal is primarily encountered in the eighteenth century novels, when the readers were trained to be intensely conscious of the process of reading bodies.

> A man's body and his mind are exactly like a jerkin, and a jerkin's lining – rumple the one, you rumple the other. (Tristam Shandy:134)

Thus the readers were informed about the connection between mind and body. For the eighteenth century novelists it was making the body a reading book for the mind and feelings.

> Making the body legible is just one part of that huge task of the novelist, characterization. But for the eighteenth-century reader it was a larger part than for the reader of our own times. (J. McMaster: xii)

In her interesting study of *Body Language in Literature*, Barbara Korte notices "the limited literary functions with which body language tends to appear in prose fiction before the mid eighteenth-century," and makes the point that such body language as does appear "often derives from a conventional repertoire" (178). The outstanding increase in quantity and detail of gestural language that comes with the development of the novel through the century goes along with a more general increase in specificity. Defoe is not very specific on physical qualities of appearance, gesture, and expression. In his turn, Fielding's aesthetic preference for the general over the particular, as well as his training as a dramatist, uses some rather conventional gestures such as the folded arms of the lover, or brows knitted in anger.

But in Richardson's vast novels there is a particular interest for precise narrative descriptions of the body, an exploitation of the meaning and countenance of facial expressions and expression gestures.

In Richardson's novel *Pamela,* the language of body has an important role in proving that virtue achieves a speechless eloquence. In this epistolary narrative, the

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heroine resists the dynamic attempts at seduction of her master, Mr. B., and her body represents a mirror of the feminine feelings and thoughts:

O how my Eyes overflow! Pamela writes in the first letter being aware of her physical torments, her body being not only the object of desire for Mr. B, but also the vehicle of the heroine's emotional condition. Mullan (1998;61) observes that Richardson's writing is "not so much spoken as displayed" and the writer uses an audio-visual vocabulary to express the feeling of the heroine: gestures, palpitations, sights and tears.

The intercommunication between male and female characters in the sentimental narratives reveals a visible emotionalism.

> I **broke off abruptly** my last letter; for I feared he was coming; and so it happened. I put the letter in my bosom, and took up my work, which lay by me; but I had so little of the artful, as he called me that I **looked as confused** if I had been doing some great harm. (*Pamela*, Letter XV)

The look of the master upon the feminine character, Pamela, is the first clue for the poor servant who becomes aware of the bad intentions of Mr. B.

> At last, I saw some reason to suspect; for he would **look upon me**, **whenever he saw me**, in such a manner, as shewed not well; and one day he came to me, as I was in summer-house in the little garden, at work with my needle, […]; and I would have gone out, but he said, No, don't go, Pamela;I have something to say to you; and you always fly me when I come near you, as if you were afraid of me. (*Pamela*, Letter IX)

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the protagonist of the novel and the second oldest of five sisters, Elizabeth is lively, quick-witted, sharp-tongued, bold and intelligent. Elizabeth is good-looking, and is especially distinguished by her fine **eyes**. The importance of her eyes may be symbolic of her abilities of perception. She has pride in her abilities to perceive the truth of situations and of people's characters. However, her perceptive abilities fail her frequently because she is influenced by vanity and judges people rashly.

> Occupied in **observing** Mr. Bingley's attentions to her sister, Elizabeth was far from suspecting that she was herself becoming an object of some interest in the eyes of his friend. Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty: he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he **looked at her** only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the **beautiful expression of her dark eyes**. (*Pride and Prejudice; 20)*

Sense and Sensibility is another eighteenth century novel where the language of eyes gets an obvious importance over the verbal expression. This non verbal sign is accompanied by

Colonel Brandon visits the Dashwoods in order to "look at Marianne and talk to Elinor" (p. 169). If his silence to Marianne leads us to believe that he loves Elinor more than Marianne, we are falling into the trap of trusting words over sight. Elinor herself is tempted to do the same thing. Colonel Brandon's eyes show what his words cannot express – that his love for Marianne is neither selfish nor blind:

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> [Colonel Brandon's] open pleasure in meeting [Elinor] after an absence of only ten days, his readiness to converse with her … might very well justify Mrs. Jennings' persuasion of his attachment …. But as it was, such a notion had scarcely ever entered [Elinor's] head, except by Mrs. Jenning's suggestion; and she could not help believing herself the nicest observer of the two; – she **watched his eyes**, while Mrs. Jennings thought only of his behaviour. (p. 305)

The visual channel is important because it both provides and acquires information about the other persons/characters. The eyes can communicate some feelings if words are missing or can also complete the verbal language making the understanding much easier or more comprehensible.

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