Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language and Culture
Meaning in Language, Art and New Media

Edited by
Finn Bostad, Craig Brandist, Lars Sigfred Evensen and Hege Charlotte Faber
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Also by Craig Brandist

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Finn Bostad
Craig Brandist
Lars Sigfred Evensen
and
Hege Charlotte Faber
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Introduction: Thinking Culture Dialogically

We have conjured up the ghost of objective culture, and now we do not know how to lay it to rest.

M. M. Bakhtin

Dialogism as alternative theory of culture: moving beyond

Why is the Bakhtin Circle still relevant, in our contemporary cultural situation as researchers, artists or interested readers? One answer could spring from the need to discuss essentialism in the theory of culture critically. Two main concepts of culture implied by Bakhtin’s Simmelian epithet (Simmel 1997), above, are: first, one that we may call essentialist. This concept has ancient roots in the Western history of philosophy, but no longer feels comfortable; yet, we are still struggling with it. We also have Bakhtin’s implied alternative, what may be termed a dialogical concept of culture.

Essentialist theories maintain that some objects have ‘essence’, that is, they have certain properties without which they could not exist – in our context the necessary and sufficient conditions for calling this or that ‘Culture’. Essentialist definitions are thus both ‘exclusive’ and excluding. But ‘culture’ (as ‘art’ or ‘game’) is still an open concept. Open concepts are somehow not like physical objects such as ‘chair’ or ‘table’, even if they have historically been treated as if they were. Given a dialogical point of view, we shall see, it is no longer possible to talk about Culture with a capital C.

The philosophy of dialogism implies a qualitatively different approach to understanding culture, for example in its epistemological focus on intersubjectivity and its dynamic way of linking specific utterances to ‘living tradition’. Meaning is dialogically viewed as an emergent
phenomenon, integrating aspects of both the immediate and the historical social contexts of performance. While such an approach implies a radical critique of essentialist theories of culture it simultaneously implies a universal epistemological orientation toward wholeness that is common to both everyday life and to works of art. According to Bakhtin, there is ‘...neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent development of the dialogue’ (Bakhtin 1986: 170).

Thus we can see culture as a network of overlapping discussions and tendencies, attitudes and ideas, changing over time. There is no essence in meaning, one common trait or condition, but a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and crossing each other, a floating dialogue (Bell 1998). To think from a dialogical perspective presupposes both openness and something that cannot be ended, a ‘never-ending story’. If we ask ourselves in which direction the dialogue goes, we might never have the answer: There is no unidimensional telos there. When we think, however, about contemporary art, media and culture more generally in terms of processuality, openness and open-endedness, it is nevertheless relevant to present an idea of moving beyond what is given and moving toward what has not yet been.

‘[B]oundaries are what life has nothing to do with’ says Bakhtin (1990: 203). The Bakhtinian notion of ‘consummation’ does not only imply the relating of parts of an architectonic whole, but also the realization of what has not yet been. It is in movement beyond that individual agency lies, even if the context is always deeply social – as when someone is considering what has not yet been in inner dialogue. A genre is admittedly one socio-historical embedding for individual cultural action, but in our attempted consummation we may also, when need arises, move beyond a genre, or move the genre beyond its current confines. Within a transcending, dialogical perspective, culture becomes both a type of processes and the products of such processes.

Dialogical theory views culture as emergent and dynamic, rather than as stable and given. It thus offers an open and flexible theory of culture, where moving beyond what is given is a main axiom. Moving toward what has not yet been can only happen granted some sort of direction, however, and some principle of completion and adequacy. Moving toward means moving toward something conceived of, however dimly, some necessity, and something of value for the striver, ethically,
epistemologically or aesthetically. One case in point is when a researcher tries to improve his or her understanding of some phenomenon like the theory of culture. Or, in the language of Bakhtin’s notes, ‘the anticipated context of the future: a sense that I am taking a new step (have progressed)’ (1986: 161).

When viewed dialogically, culture has ethical, epistemological and aesthetic dimensions that, while distinct, are closely related. It follows that the relationship between values and life is intimate. Culture is not something lofty, something ‘over and above’ everyday life, but rather ‘life looking beyond itself’. It follows from a dialogical perspective that culture is both embodied and a core matter for absolutely everybody, including the derogatory ‘anybody’. Bakhtin bet his own doctoral thesis on demonstrating the deep epistemological significance of folk practices in what had often been seen as the ultimate of vulgarity – the medieval carnival and its illegitimate offspring, carnivalesque literature.

But there is also an ontological subtext in this. Dialogism offers a kind of relationism that seems to be potentially applicable across sciences and fields of study: ‘The world as an event (and not as existence in ready-made form)’ (1986: 162). The processualism, specificity and openness (emergence) of dialogism all hinge on an ontological relationism where no phenomenon can be validly studied without seeing its relations as a basic contributor to its characteristics. A dialogic theory of culture, like the Gestalt theory from which it partially emerges, may thus even have insights to offer beyond theory of culture. The significance of such a relational ontology, however, remains to be worked out and discussed.

**Historical difficulties with the dialogical perspective**

Even if we adopt a dialogical perspective on culture and cultural phenomena, things are not so easy as they might seem. That is mainly because of the history of the texts and ideas by Bakhtin and different members of the Bakhtin Circle in Western culture since the first translations, and the contexts in which they have been presented. These contexts are still not entirely clear, and to secure a better understanding of the particular philosophical perspectives in the Circle that have appeared, we need to address this history and try to situate some things in their proper places. We also have to think *with* Bakhtin and his colleagues – and continue this thinking in an ongoing dialogue with those texts and ideas. In other words, even we ourselves as co-thinkers have to move beyond.
Since the early 1980s, ‘thinking culture dialogically’ has been synonymous with thinking about culture in a way inspired by the works of Bakhtin. The impact of Bakhtin’s essays on the novel, which were written in the 1930s but appeared in English translation in 1981, was immediate and far-reaching. This Russian thinker at the time seemed to have anticipated many aspects of then fashionable theories derived from French thinkers of the 1960s, and Bakhtin offered a way to address the legitimate concerns those French thinkers had raised in a way that seemed more responsible and fruitful for literary application. There followed a tidal wave of applications and articles that credited Bakhtin with inventing a myriad of perspectives and disciplines, many of which were fundamentally incompatible.

It was not difficult to incorporate the perspectives presented in the works of Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Medvedev that had been translated before 1981 into the perspective of Bakhtin’s work of the 1930s. We had been assured in numerous articles, as well as in Clark and Holquist’s impressive 1984 biography of Bakhtin, that the works of Voloshinov and Medvedev were actually written by Bakhtin himself; the Marxism advocated therein being mere ‘window dressing’ to secure publication. Certainly, many continuities were evident: the hostility to Saussurean linguistics; the insistence on the interactive nature of individual consciousnesses in a social world where language was a shared medium; the correlation of the stasis of meaning with authoritarian forces within language and change with popular resistance to that authority, and the continuity between forms of social consciousness and the significance of literary form. The Rabelais book, which had been translated as early as 1968 also fitted into this perspective, since Bakhtin talked about Rabelais, laughter and carnival in some of the essays in the 1981 collection. The 1984 translation of the second edition of Bakhtin’s book on Dostoevsky further confirmed the perspective offered there.

All this began to fall apart a decade after the appearance of the edited collection The Dialogic Imagination when, in 1990 and 1993 appeared the translations of Bakhtin’s early work on authorship and moral philosophy, respectively. Suddenly we were presented with a seemingly different writer altogether, one who wrote a strange type of phenomenology in a language that was quite distant from that of contemporary literary criticism. While Clark and Holquist, Todorov and others had alerted Anglophone readers that such works were on their way, there is no doubt that those who valued Bakhtin for his literary categories were seriously shaken by this sudden backwards turn. Not only was the terminology different, but the celebration of decentralising forces in
Bakhtin appeared willing to cherish finalisation and moderation, perhaps even art's detachment from life. The moral philosophy valued individual ‘answerability’ for one's acts, and yet the category of ‘answerability’ and that of intersubjective dialogue seemed to have much in common.

One of the rather mundane reasons for the surprise was the translation of these works. Apart from the haphazard order of translation, which mirrored the publication of Bakhtin's works in Russian, the works on language and literature had been translated mainly by literary specialists from the United States, who had little knowledge of the intellectual background of a culturally oriented philosopher's terminology. Instead of looking for the sources of Bakhtin's terminology, which was no easy task for works published in his name, since the Russian texts were almost totally devoid of footnotes, the translators had rendered the works in terms reminiscent of American literary ‘New Criticism'. This certainly made Bakhtin's ideas accessible to a wide audience, and his often ponderous Russian was enlivened by the flourishes of enthusiasts for stylistics. In texts such as those of Voloshinov, however, which did not deal with literature as a central feature, the language of contemporary psychology and sociology was marshalled, so that the Anglophone reader could discern many parallels with contemporary social and cultural theory. Thus, when the bilingual Vadim Liapunov, a meticulous translator with a good deal more knowledge of the German background to the Russian's ideas than previous translators, took on the difficult and incomplete early works, the contrast was guaranteed to both surprise and confuse. While these translations were of high quality, even Liapunov, however, contributed to the tendency to view Bakhtin's ideas as a *telos* leading from responsibility to dialogue, by translating the Russian *otvetstvennost* by the neologism ‘answerability’ where ‘responsibility’ would have sufficed. Thus, Bakhtin's shift from the epistemology, ethics and aesthetics of intersubjectivity to dialogue was seen as an inevitability, rather than as a layering of one paradigm on top of another.

Recent archival research firmly suggests that the works of Voloshinov and Medvedev were (at least largely) the work of their signatories, with all evidence to the contrary resting on the oral testimony of far from disinterested witnesses (see Brandist et al. 2004). Voloshinov's work on language was based on intellectual sources quite distinct from those of the early Bakhtin, but the perspectives were eventually accepted by the latter, who subsequently combined his own early ideas about culture that so many had warmed to was simply not there.
intersubjectivity with Voloshinov’s analysis of verbal interaction in the 1929 Dostoevsky book. This combination is certainly not unproblematic, not least because questions of social-institutional forces operating within a linguistic medium are grafted onto a perspective that was designed to deal with the interaction of individual consciousnesses. As Craig Brandist shows in this volume, the fusion is achieved through treating both individuals and social groups as ‘legal persons’, that is exclusively as the bearers of rights and responsibilities. The result is thus that a whole series of concerns central to social analysis and cognitive science is ‘bracketed out’: the biological needs of discursive subjects, the economic structures underlying the formation and motivation of social groups, the institutionalisation of discursive intercourse, and the given structures of the world that are perceived by subjects prior to their reprocessing in thought, being some of the most pressing. Voloshinov in particular had sought, and partially succeeded in, keeping these features in view through his idea that the sign refracts something extra-discursive that is already structured and is given to consciousness. Bakhtin drops this materialist idea, using refraction only as the way in which one intention recontextualises that of another. From the beginning of the 1930s, Bakhtin’s work loses the proto-realist connections it had through the Circle as a whole, and develops in a way more thoroughly conditioned by contemporary German idealism, with the link to concrete phenomena provided by specific literary texts.

Immersion in German idealism, particularly neo-Hegelianism, in the 1930s certainly enabled Bakhtin to develop a keener sense of historical movement and the interaction of large-scale cultural forces. However, in combination with his neo-Kantian leanings, this exacerbated Bakhtin’s tendency to treat cultural phenomena as a specific realm of freedom, undetermined by material necessity. Seeking to outline an ethics and aesthetics of verbal creation, Bakhtin was inclined to minimize the dependence of the created on the already structured quality of the given.

Paradoxically, the tendency throughout the 1980s was quite the contrary with regard to Bakhtin’s own work. Most applications of Bakhtin’s ideas were inclined to stick to what this Russian had given us, and to simply apply his concepts to ever new and more varied material. Bakhtin’s work became a resource for categories that could be utilised in cultural analysis, but which were not seriously interrogated. In this sense, most applications failed to treat Bakhtin’s own work dialogically, since moving beyond what is given, we keep claiming, is one of its basic premises.
Dialogism and the creation of meaning

While, as Holquist has argued, dialogism for Bakhtin might have an ontological significance that transcends the human world, human beings differ from other parts of reality in our capacity to imagine what may lie beyond. This imagination presupposes signs, and signs raise issues of meaning. This is a point where the current book enters directly into dialogue with dialogical cultural theory. Voloshinov (1973) viewed signs as mediating entities, mediating both between actual people and between people and their surroundings. As symbolic tools they both reflect the functional dynamics of the social matrix that created them and deeply affect their creators in return. This dialectic is equally significant for verbal and for non-verbal artefacts.

The socio-historical embeddedness of symbolic tools implies that signs carry their previous use with them without having entirely fixed meanings. Signs are in this view seen as an open meaning resource; their actual meaning can only emerge in situated, specific social interaction. Due to this situatedness, actual meaning can only occur in the loci where specific addressivity meets specific response-ibility. Meaning is hence a relational phenomenon not only in the systemic sense (as given by relative position within a ready-made system), but also in the specifically intersubjective, dynamic and co-constructive sense. Meaning springs out of dialogue and belongs to dialogue, making dialogue a core aspect of all forms of culture.

This relational perspective has several fundamental implications for how meaning is to be viewed within the theory of culture. The mediating role of signs (all artifacts, verbal and non-verbal) implies that meaning occurs in interaction, as an emerging result of that interaction (although simultaneously its tool). Meaning is in this sense dynamic and embedded in social life. Yet, as we have seen, it may transcend the immediate realities of actual social life (like relations between participants, time and space), and thus be the prime carrier of our moving beyond. Any cultural utterance refracts the intertextual echoes it carries, thus fitting them to the participants, situation and purposes at hand. In refracting available ‘semiosic’ (Evensen 2001) resources, however, we benefit from convention without being the victims of convention. When available resources are inadequate, we will eventually construct new ones. Meaning is, in a word, dialogical, and a dialogical theory of culture is simultaneously a theory of cultural creativity.

At this point it should be clear that dialogism offers a potential for developing a specifically humanistic approach to culture. But one could
simultaneously claim that dialogism offers a truly interdisciplinary perspective, where even the natural sciences would play a part: The Bakhtin Circle’s interest in dialogue encompassed several then revolutionary ideas in natural science. Bakhtin was deeply fascinated by the new physics of Einstein, Planck and Bohr, and counted the mathematician Matvei Kagan and the biologist Ivan Kanaev among his close friends (Holquist 1990: xv). Reality follows in a dialogical view not as a fixed collection of entities (objects) as much as an emerging collection of relations (processes, tensions and forces). But this ‘extra-disciplinary’, relational ontology of emergence is used also for cultural theory, as when Bakhtin in his essay on the chronotope used insights from Einstein’s theory of relativity (read: time as the fourth dimension of space) to develop his notion of the ‘chronotope’ in artistic literature.

Most current definitions of culture tacitly imply an exclusively social science perspective when they focus on culture as a socially organized collection, of concepts, habits and artifacts (see Cole 1996 for overview). Most definitions developed within mainstream social science, however, prove limited in explaining the creative aspects of culture. In dialogism, creation is incorporated seamlessly, without sacrificing the social, organizational and material aspects.

A dialogic approach, we believe, can substantially contribute to our understanding of meaning, be it in language, literature, visual art, philosophy, intellectual history, politics, communication technologies or new media. This contribution has to do with the relational ontology of dialogism. In our specific acts, actions and activities we depend on others, even in those cases when nobody else is present. We admittedly do things according to our individual agendas and understandings, but these agendas and understandings have largely developed through our interactions with others, and with larger societal and material aspects of reality. In other words, inter-actions and inter-acts are more basic than actions and acts, exactly in underpinning these. Several corollaries for meaning follow from such an ontological starting point.

Meaning is tied to actual, specific human beings as these are carrying out their actual, specific inter-acts (Linell 1998) in their actual, specific material and mental contexts (their ways of being situated). Human actors are positioned both materially and symbolically in ways that both help and hinder. Any human observation is of necessity tied to a deictic time-place anchor. Our points of view, that is our figurative ‘positions’, are thus derived from our actual, physical and social positions (the specific points from which we actually view), and hence carry a specific perspective, both physically and figuratively (cf. Schütz and
Luckmann 1989). Through our specific positions, we all have some ‘excess of seeing’ in relation to fellow human beings and ‘excess of blindness’ in relation to their similar excess of seing in relation to us (Holquist 1990: xxvi).

Meaning is thus always somebody’s meaning, and meaning for somebody: ‘In point of fact, the word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee’ (Voloshinov 1973: 86). There is no meaning over and above actual human beings, or essential meaning in and of itself. Since human beings differ, meaning differs accordingly (cf. Bakhtin’s 1981 notion of ‘heteroglossia’). It follows from this insight that there is no essential artefact in and of itself. All artefacts are situated, as somebody’s artefacts – meant for somebody – in dialogue between-bodies.

In dialogism’s insistence on such specificity lies a principled guarantee against unfounded abstraction, premature generalization and essentialist approaches to culture and cultural meaning. Dialogists can thus, to repeat, never capitalize the word culture. Meaning is always specific in the above sense, deeply influenced by the specific inter-actants in their specific ways of being situated. Specificity of meaning furthermore applies to all forms of meaning, including meaning in art.

Voloshinov and Bakhtin pointed out the basic role of human signs in interaction. Signs are not just basic to language, but to absolutely all forms of meaning-making, be they verbal, postural, architectonic, technological, visual or tonal. It is exactly via signs that we are able to mean. The Bakhtin Circle emphasized that signs are partly material (physical), but in no way does it follow from their materiality that signs are ‘things’ in the normal sense. As material objects, they are assigned (!) their function as signs by their specific, but recurrent connection with human beings. People are thus a constitutive aspect of ‘the sign-hood of signs’ (Evensen 2001). Furthermore, signs have multiple faces (thus transcending the Janus-face metaphor). In the Bakhtin Circle semiology, signs always mediate between different social realities (those of their origin, those of their subsequent trajectories in historical-cultural time-space, those of imagined ‘possible’ or ‘alternative’ worlds, as well as that of the specific situation currently at hand). Second, signs mediate between the currently meaning organism and its immediate context; they mediate between what is external and internal to the meaning-making organism (Leiman 1999).

It follows from such a ‘worlds’-transcending semiology that signs help constitute culture along with the actions and activities that they serve.
They simultaneously carry culture across inter-individual, social and temporal borders – and through their mediation even alter their ‘users’, thus explaining the auto-poetic function of language, other forms of culture, and arts. The mutually constitutive connection of signs to people and their inter-action, means that signs are to be understood dynamically, as symbolic events put to work within social and cultural events. As a result, meaning is always emergent, an integral process. ‘The sign is an event’, says Anne Freadman (2001).

This emergent process is coloured by recurrence linking the specific, immediate performance at hand to a historical-cultural context. As we act in specific contexts, similar acts in similar contexts ‘ring at the back of our minds’, both colouring meaning emergence and stimulating it. Similarly, we draw on those ‘semiosic’ resources that have emerged historically to serve similar acts and similar contexts, and thus are relevant to that which is immediately present in our here and now. In this dynamic sense, resources of signs, utterances, genre and cultural form become available to us. These resources carry their socio-cultural histories, as we saw above, and thus add meaning as they are being continually drawn on during meaning making.

**Thinking with: moving beyond the Bakhtin Circle**

The insistence on situated specificity and emergence, or moving beyond in dialogical ontology, implies a need to keep developing the dialogical tradition. In order to take dialogism seriously as a foundation, we need to treat its insights critically and situate its valuable contributions within a historical and intellectual framework. One way of doing this is by discussing dialogical topics and ideas in conjunction with how these topics and ideas have been treated by intellectuals in other traditions, for example traditions that were unknown to founding dialogists, or traditions that did not know about dialogism. Such discussion is a theme running through most of the contributions to the present volume.

A second way of doing it is to build insights from later empirical work into the theory. The Bakhtin Circle was truly interdisciplinary, and Bakhtin was interested in new physics and physiological studies of the human central nervous system (Holquist 1990: xv). On such a basis, we may, for instance, include recent empirical work on vision (see Kanizsa 1979 for overview), which demonstrates that ‘moving beyond’ is not just a matter of semiotically based imagination, as Bakhtin may have presupposed. It is an essential aspect of the physiological perception process itself. The sensing human organism is simultaneously a sense-making
organism, adding wholeness and meaning to perceived images, at a physiological, processual level prior to social cognition. Vision is thus in a basically material, embodied sense a ‘visualizing’ or ‘visionary’ process. Such new empirical insights are important, of course, when doing dialogical studies on visual arts or in multimedial electronic culture. We may similarly consider recent research in different fields of verbal interaction, as does Linell (1998) in his discussion of a dialogical basis for communication theory.

A third way of searching beyond (early) dialogism is to scrutinize the core ideas of dialogism itself and the differences, even ideological tensions that existed between the members of the Bakhtin Circle. There was clearly a variety of perspectives on, for example, Marxism and religion within the Circle. As a consequence, there was a variety of types of ontological and epistemological relationism, ranging from the proto-realism of Voloshinov and Medvedev to Bakhtin’s idealism of object constitution. In their joint concern with the relationship between macro- and micro-social relations, different starting points were posed in different works. Furthermore, different members of the Circle had different areas of specialisation, Medvedev, for example, was more deeply immersed in European formalism and art scholarship than either Bakhtin or Voloshinov. In such tensions and varied orientations lie much potential for rethinking and future developments.

In approaching dialogism itself in such dialogical ways we are learning about the pear by eating it, so to speak. In this way the present volume is more than just a contribution to Bakhtin studies, in the sense of understanding Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle in a post facto manner. This is admittedly very important as a pre-requisite for being able to carry out dialogical analyses in new historical, social and cultural contexts, but may by its very approach inadvertently come to reify dialogism, as any theory may unduly freeze its research object and thus radically alter its very nature (see Holquist 1993: x on Bakhtin’s criticism of Kant, and similarly Bakhtin’s insistence on staying with the actual, ongoing, never-returning act or event in Toward a Philosophy of the Act). The best antidote to such a possible fate, we believe, is to try – boldly although dangerously – to develop dialogism further. The contributions in the present volume differ in their orientation toward this task, but most of them do share it.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I comprises three essays on the Bakhtin Circle. Craig Brandist challenges some trends within Bakhtin Studies by showing that the work of the Bakhtin Circle itself was a variety of adoptions from, responses to and a movement beyond ideas then
current in a variety of disciplines. Bakhtin’s notion of responsibility (ответственность, sometimes translated as ‘answerability’) is shown to draw heavily on the German Civil Law tradition, which had been adopted by both neo-Kantian and phenomenological philosophers. We see that Bakhtin’s use of the terms dialogue, ‘event’ (событие) and ‘discursive (or speech) genre’ (речевой жанр) emerged from a jurisprudential paradigm, and that the same development can be found in an important but neglected work on the phenomenology of ‘social acts’ by Adolf Reinach from 1913. While Bakhtin’s work thereby appears considerably less original, we see that Bakhtin’s approach differs from that of the realist Reinach by attempting to forge a compromise between neo-Kantianism and phenomenology. Bakhtin is thus shown to be a syncretic thinker who combined ideas from different traditions but often failed to achieve a complete synthesis.

The contribution of Renate Lachmann is both an exposition of central aspects of dialogism and a critique of certain inconsistencies in Bakhtin’s nascent thinking, his ‘theory in becoming’. In discussing meaning in Bakhtin, she emphasizes that actualized meaning always has the form of response: a contact between contexts and a crossing of contexts. Meaning is thus a dynamic confluence. Response is a crucial element for appreciating dialogism as an approach to literature and the fine arts. An appreciation of the ambivalence and ambiguity often present in art follows from the responsiveness of meaning; it always has multiple sources.

But ambivalence and ambiguity also apply to Bakhtin himself. Bakhtin portrayed rhetoric as antithetical to dialogue. Whereas dialogue is mutual and liberating, rhetoric is manipulative and oppressive. Still, the fantastic, and deeply rhetorical, element in Bakhtin’s material is valued by him as epistemologically rich and liberating. Lachmann criticizes his anti-sophism for not taking different forms of rhetoric into account – the official and centripetal vs the unofficial and centrifugal. In the latter lies some of the basic sources of dialogism. Bakhtin himself, furthermore, has a distinctly rhetorical side, with his metaphorical characterizations and neologisms. His transcending-transgressive rhetorical acts speak differently from his anti-rhetorical words.

Sigmund Ongstad argues for what he calls an explicit ‘tripartite’ thinking in one of Bakhtin’s most famous writings, The Problem of Speech Genres. Ongstad outlines a Kantian epistemological tradition of a triadic model of meaning-making, and he criticises what he finds to be a lack of understanding for the simultaneity and reciprocity of the triadic elements when Bakhtin’s epistemological position is applied in a
reductionist way in various other fields of research. He claims that the triadic structure in Bakhtin's work mentioned above has mostly been overlooked and hardly commented upon, and that this must then form a basis for a critical investigation of the relation between a reductionist interpretation of dialogue in Bakhtin's works on the one hand and Bakhtin's own triadic understanding of dialogue on the other. Thus a crucial challenge turns out to be how utterance and hence genre should be epistemologically perceived in the scope of these two positionings. The article accordingly ends addressing the problem of validity inherent in the two perspectives.

Part II comprises four essays dealing with dialogic approaches to the theory of language. Mika Lähteenmäki starts with a monologic idea of mainstream linguistics, that meaning is somehow fixed in the verbal artifact, the linguistic 'code', or inherent in it as 'literal meaning'. Instead he pursues the Bakhtin Circle idea of meaning as a potential that can only be finalized-for-now in specific socio-cultural contexts with intersubjectivity between actual interlocutors. The history of this idea uncovers that it has roots in several intellectual sources over several centuries. But dialogism simultaneously hides an axiological problem: Is meaning an entirely relativistic notion?

Lähteenmäki's chapter is devoted to a discussion of this problem, demonstrating that the social nature of meaning makes such a conclusion impossible. Here, he links the dialogical notion of actualized meaning as an emergent phenomenon with the use-theory of meaning associated with Wittgenstein. In Wittgenstein, meaning is tied to those socio-cultural activities or practices with their norms that it is embedded in, and functions within. Meaning is thus always socio-culturally anchored, but at the same time relatively open and flexible. The notion of emergence is discussed with reference to its ontologic or epistemic nature, suggesting that this notion overrides the distinction between ontology and epistemology. Similarly, the socio-cultural anchoring of meaning potentials implies that such potentials require actual social action ('use' in this particular sense) for their fulfilment as actual meaning. Such use in turn influences the further potentials of the semiotic resources being used. Emergence thus overrides the distinction between the immediate and the supra-immediate.

Per Linell takes the historical development of linguistics as his empirical case for demonstrating how even a patently monologist cultural tradition may be given a dialogical interpretation. In the historical development of theoretical linguistics, practical/ political and diverse language-related activities like establishing national standards, describing
them or teaching people to read and write in such standards gave rise to a set of gradually hidden assumptions. These assumptions were included in an intellectual project that established the abstracted notion of a ‘language’, with its abstract grammatical rules of realization and the equally abstract notion of a general language faculty. The research object of modern linguistics was, in other words, simply not there to begin with; it was created during this historical process: ‘Linguists are language makers’, this specific linguist tells us.

In his analysis Linell demonstrates how monologism itself exists in a dialogical, sociohistorically constituted context. This is a fundamental critique of modern linguistics, but also a powerful demonstration of the power of a dialogical approach to historical-systematic studies of cultural phenomena. The primary tool used in his demonstration is his notion of recontextualization, which builds on Bakhtinian ideas, but also ideas of other researchers (like Goffman, and Linell’s own empirical work). Thus, Linell’s contribution exemplifies moving beyond the foundational dialogism of the Bakhtin Circle.

Hannele Dufva moves beyond by discussing the Bakhtin Circle in relation to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin Lee Whorf. Whorf’s views on the cultural embedding of meaning have particularly been misrepresented as naïve relativism. As thinkers, Worf, Merleau-Ponty and Bakhtin were different in many respects, but shared currently relevant premises in their rejection of the Cartesian mind-body dualism and in their insisting on the situatedness and particularity of cultural phenomena like language and thinking. They were also seeking some kind of a non-positivist reunion between human and natural sciences, where a distinctly human perspective could be combined with methodological rigour into ‘a beautiful and rigorous science’ of dynamics.

The notion of position in time and space for human subjects was central to Whorf as well as to the Bakhtin Circle. Since subjects always relate to other subjects, who are equally positioned, this relation implies sociocultural anchoring rather than solipsism or relativism. Similarly, their seeing the world as processual, emergent and event-like links Bakhtin with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. An ontology of embodiment furthermore implies that humans are simultaneously unique and connected with every-body. Thus, worlds and world views are different, but also necessarily blend.

Lars Sigfred Evensen defends the position of student writers as genuine meaning-makers in a cultural context. Their meaning making is, however, often distorted by institutionalised readers searching for symptoms of lacking competence rather than for genuine utterances deserving
genuine response. In the process of creating an actor position for those who are acquiring culture, micro-social theories of meaning may be liberating and macro-social theories of established cultural meaning oppressive and counter-productive. Neither of these types of theories, however, can fully explain cultural meaning as a complex phenomenon. In his article, Evensen shows how dialogism can both solve axiological problems revealed by educational contexts and serve as a platform for creating a culturally meaningful theory of verbal meaning.

Evensen moves beyond Bakhtin by developing a specific dialogist model of meaning in literacy that can at the same time function as an analytical tool for other fields of cultural theory. The situated case reported in his contribution is analysis of jazz improvisation.

Part III of the book comprises four essays dealing with new technology and visual arts. Finn Bostad applies Bakhtin’s reflections on dialogue to communication in the public spaces of the Internet where people are brought together as participants on diverse and rapidly changing arenas of cultural activity. Bakhtin wrote about the time-space or the chronotope of earlier historical periods and mentions the Agora of classical Athens and the parlours and boulevards of 19th century Paris as arenas of oral and written discourse. Bostad similarly discusses aspects of the participation through language in the new electronic public spaces of today, and the social activity that he terms electronic discourse.

He suggests a taxonomy for dealing with the various Internet arenas, from email and chat to interactive web sites and weblogs, based on how they relate to the time and space of communication. Digital media give opportunities to communicate in both synchronous and asynchronous ways, and presence in dialogue becomes virtual as the physical location of interlocutors may be of less importance as they are connected online. He questions, however, whether such ICT-based discourses meet the demands we put on meaningful and social participative dialogues, pointing to the fact that there may be a tendency to utilize the Internet for content production and presentation without utilizing the potential for dialogue and response to the same extent. Bostad’s examples focus on participation, mutuality, presence and sharing as main constituents of dialogue, and he argues that these may take on new forms in electronic environments. Electronic discourse affords a new potential, but it also places new constraints on meaning-making and communication. At the same time, however, this technology also represents a loss vis-à-vis face-to-face communication and its extra-linguistic potential that we use to ensure the quality of communication.
Hege Charlotte Faber also studies cultural workers in-their-becoming, in her case art students. In studying their development, she emphasizes the epistemological potential of fine art, suggesting that we should look upon art as a kind of cultural research. When the concept of art as cultural research is connected to the Bakhtinian concept of dialogue, one can also have a closer look at the dialogue between theory and practice in the artist’s work. Art can be looked upon as a way to get more knowledge.

In traditional art and aesthetics, we find the idea of the passive (disinterested) viewer, beginning with Immanuel Kant and the aesthetics of the 18th century. But in a Bakhtinian perspective, the passive viewer disappears: Art will always be in a dialogue with other art and also with the world, and works of art and art viewers (or users) will also always be in a dialogue with each other. Through the history of art, a lot of artists have written about their own work or about art more in general (in letters, manifestos, articles, notebooks, aphorisms, essays, poetics or in interviews and discussions). Faber presents a writing workshop she had with a small group of first year students at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art. In their texts about the works of art of fellow students, the students do not distinguish between theory and practice in artistic creation, and a dialogical perspective is highly relevant to both their creation of art and the way one talks about art at an academy. And the dialogue is about the capability to be answering in an active way, always, both in regards to contemporary art, and in regards to historical art.

Eduardo Kac goes beyond by pointing to the fact that even if the words ‘dialogical’ and ‘dialogism’ appear often in literary criticism and philosophy, very little has been said about the meaning of these terms in the visual arts. When applied to visual arts, these terms become tropes similar to their counterparts in literary theory, that is, metaphors to support the analysis of cultural products that are materially self-contained (like books or paintings) and therefore incapable of creating the living experience of dialogues. Kac proposes that new insights can be gained by examining art works that are themselves real dialogues, that is active forms of communication between living entities. Such works can often be found among artists that pursue the aesthetics of telecommunications media.

To characterise these works, Kac proposes a quite literal use of the term ‘dialogism’. He presents four main elaborations of this move: First, he thinks it important to identify and articulate the significance of the field of practice itself, which he refers to as ‘dialogical art’. Second, there is a clear difference between dialogical art and interactive art. Third,
dialogical aesthetics is intersubjective and stands in stark contrast to monological art, which is largely based on the concept of individual expression. Last, because it employs media that enable real dialogues, electronic art is uniquely suited to explore and develop a dialogical aesthetics. Seen collectively, these notions will, according to Kac, inform the identification and study of what can properly be called ‘dialogical electronic art’.

In her contribution, Beryl Graham experiments with using Bakhtinian views on dialogue as a new type of acid test for interactive art works in new electronic media. To what extent is claimed interactivity dialogic? To what extent may new media allow for democratizing a monologist culture of capitalized Art vs decapitalized audience? Is subaltern subversion possible? These are focal challenges for artists exploring the possibilities of new media.

Through her critical tour of recent electronic art forms and art works, Graham demonstrates that choices offered the audience are sometimes far from being genuine choices; responses from the installation are not often genuine responses, and the conversations invited between audience and art work may lack crucial aspects of dialogue. The computer is, of course, an ‘idiot’. Still, we paradoxically go on ‘interacting’ with it in rather naïve ways, thus inviting a situation where we are the ones manipulated, not the manipulators; we are subverted rather than being the subverters. Bakhtinian theory has the analytic power to unveil such recent paradoxes facing modern artists as major challenges.

Conclusion

The different contributions to this volume demonstrate that dialogism – old and new – offers an approach to cultural meaning that seems equally fruitful for studies of language, literature, art and new media. Since the handling of meaning is an acid test for any theory of culture, dialogism holds considerable promise as a still emerging approach.

Not every reader of this book may agree with the way different contributions try to bring a dialogical perspective into new fields or new fields into dialogism. But the contributions will hopefully stimulate new and interesting debates as well as continue ongoing ones. And this is at the core of dialogism. A dialogue is per se something that can never end as long as human beings keep being around, and it is something that now and then takes us in new and interesting directions. To move beyond what is given is the core of ‘Man’s’ [sic] creation of culture, and dialogism as a cultural perspective is focusing exactly on that.
Notes

1. Vadim Liapunov’s translation of zaivershennost’ as ‘consummation’ inevitably imposes a certain understanding on a term that generally means to complete. A neutral interpretation of the term is more appropriate.

2. In a letter to Vadim Kozhinov in 1961 Bakhtin notes that he, Voloshinov and Medvedev worked in ‘the closest creative contact’ in the late 1920s and while Voloshinov’s and Medvedev’s books maintain a significant ‘independence and originality’ a ‘common conception of language and discursive production’ informs both these works and his own Dostoevsky book (Bakhtin and Kozhinov 2000: 127).

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Part I
The Bakhtin Circle
Law and the Genres of Discourse: the Bakhtin Circle’s Theory of Language and the Phenomenology of Right

Although the Bakhtin Circle have very little to say about law, legal philosophy permeates their work, from the theory of the novel to the Bakhtinian account of discursive interaction. The latter, which has become a key focus for cultural theory, will be our focus here. The reason this influence is not immediately apparent is that it was refracted through a group of neo-Kantian and neo-scholastic philosophies that had already applied the principles of legal reasoning, particularly as developed in German philosophy of law, to some of the main areas later developed by the Bakhtin Circle. The Circle were, however, well aware of the legal background to their thought, as can be seen from the early Bakhtin’s endorsement of the Marburg School doctrine that jurisprudence is the ‘mathematics’ of the human sciences (Pumpianskii 1992: 235). Matvei Kagan had studied under Cohen in Marburg and so the Circle had direct knowledge of current legal-philosophical thinking in Germany, while recent work in the archives shows that Voloshinov was also familiar with Marburg legal philosophy. Furthermore, one of the main areas of development for neo-Kantinism in Russia was precisely in the area of the philosophy of law, with Pavel Novgorodtsev, Bogdan Kistiakovskii, and Sergius Hessen being some of the more notable figures involved (Vucinich 1976: 125–52; Walicki 1987; Saval’skii 1908). The latter two actually studied under the German neo-Kantians, with Hessen studying under Cohen and Natorp at the same time as Kagan. Finally, Pavel Medvedev was a graduate in Law from St. Petersburg University, where several prominent Russian neo-Kantians taught.

However, as we now know, the Circle did not draw exclusively on neo-Kantian sources and, indeed, some of the main sources of their ideas came from a tradition fundamentally hostile to neo-Kantian idealism: the various derivations from the work of Franz Brentano. Brentano had
developed an Aristotelian ontology in which the mind ‘feeds’ on the empirical world, deriving formal categories from encounters with putative objects. Some of the figures who played important roles in shaping Bakhtinian theory, either directly or indirectly, were explicitly ontological thinkers in this sense: Karl Stumpf, Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, Gustav Shpet, Anton Marty and Karl Bühler. Of these the first was instrumental in shaping the way in which the Brentanian legacy was transformed into a philosophy of *Sachverhalte* (states of affairs), the structured ‘way in which objects hang together’ to which the mind has access (Wittgenstein 1922: SS. 2.027–2.063). Crucial in this regard, as we shall see, may well have been Stumpf’s training in ‘institutions and pandects, on the history of Roman and German law’ (Stumpf 1961: 391). Brentanian theory was later to return to law, via the early Husserl’s revision of Stumpf’s ontology, in the work of William Schapp, Adolf Reinach and Edmund Husserl’s son Gerhart Husserl. Interestingly, in the cases of Reinach and G. Husserl this led to elaborate analyses of the relations between forms of linguistic representation and the juridical process (Smith 1978: 429; Reinach 1983). While it seems these works were unknown to the Bakhtin Circle, Reinach was certainly an influence on Scheler, who influenced Bakhtin directly. Thus, even in those areas in which the abstractions of neo-Kantianism had made very little headway, and the anti-Kantian Brentanians had made very much their own field, a common juridical framework persisted that facilitated the fusion pursued by the Bakhtin Circle.

**German jurisprudence and philosophy**

To understand why this framework was adopted by both philosophical trends one must consider the specific features of German legal philosophy. Unlike English law, the codification of German law, especially the Civil Code (*Bundesgesetzbuch*, hereafter BGB), which was promulgated in 1896, proceeded along highly theotised lines in an attempt to portray society faithfully, completely and objectively from above. German legal culture was devoid of a unified private law, a centralized judiciary and an organized and powerful stratum of practising lawyers. In their place presided remote and theorizing professors who found their home in the so-called Pandecist school, which created the conceptual framework for the BGB. Zweigert and Kötz characterize the Pandecist conception of the legal system as:

a closed order of institutions, ideas, and principles developed from Roman law: one only had to apply logical or ‘scientific’ methods in
order to reach the solution of any legal problem. In this way the application of law became a merely ‘technical’ process, a sort of ‘mathematics’ obeying only the logical necessity of abstract concepts and having nothing to do with practical reason, with social value judgements, or with ethical, religious, economic, or policy considerations.

This characterization is by no means unusual. One standard German work describes the BGB as ‘the legal calculating machine par excellence’ (Zweigert and Kötz 1987: 146, 151). It is quite easy to see how this tradition of legal thinking could lead to the Marburg account of jurisprudence as the ‘mathematics’ of the human sciences, even if they were to reject the positivist spirit of the Pandecists. Central to the Marburg recasting was the a priori distinction between the ‘Is’ and the ‘Ought’, with the former signifying the positive law, social facts, and the prevailing social morality and the latter the values which the law should embody and implement. Jurisprudence now becomes the mathematics of the ‘Ought’, of what Rudolf Stammler (1925) called the ‘just law’. This project was carried on in Russia by Novgorodtsev, whose first book was an attempt to forge a compromise between the Pandecist school and the natural law tradition which he later recast according to a distinctly Marburgian neo-Kantianism (Novgorodtsev 1896).

However, while the Pandecist scheme could be adjusted to fit a neo-Kantian formalism, its compatibility with the anti-formalist thrust of Brentanian neo-Scholasticism was less obvious. The work of Kevin Mulligan, Karl Schuhmann, Barry Smith and others has opened this area up for analysis in a way that has many implications for our understanding of the Bakhtin Circle in intellectual context. The link was established by the exhaustively descriptive aim of the BGB, which was framed ‘as standing in a relation of projection to an independently existing legal order, the individual sentences of the code mirroring corresponding legal complexes in the world of human behaviour’. Here the a priori is not a Kantian principle of reason to be applied to the empirical world but a feature inherent to the structure of the empirical world itself. Relationships of necessitation, exclusion, compatibility, indifference, and the like are seen as a priori features of human actions. Thus, for example, theft necessitates the acquisition of another’s property and excludes the prior establishment of a relation of ownership between the thief and his or her booty. The legal code thus becomes a catalogue of possible elements of the juridical world which is a conceptually but not materially isolatable layer of reality (Smith and Mulligan 1981: 22).
One important difference between the phenomenological and neo-Kantian receptions of German legal philosophy was the former's wholehearted acceptance of a neutralised version of the object of German legal philosophy: the Sachverhalt (state of affairs). As Peter Simons explains, the 'legally neutral facts' of an incident constitute a Tatbestand, but when it 'falls under the law' it becomes a case (ein Fall) and the facts of this case ‘as subsumed under legal determinations (e.g. a certain sort of offence) constitutes a Sachverhalt’. Thus, ‘who is to blame, who pays etc., depends on the Sachverhalt, not (directly) on the Tatbestand’ (Simons 1992: 331–2). What counts is the legal relationship between Rechtssubjekte or between Rechtssubjekte and Rechtsobjekte, in which the rights and obligations arising from a legal provision laid down in a statute intersect. This is termed Rechtsverhältnis. Thus, only the Sachverhalt can be the object of judgment, facts or events in themselves are not legitimate objects. Stumpf had followed this line of thinking to distinguish between the specific content of a judgement (Sachverhalt) and the content of a presentation (matter). In Logical Investigations Husserl developed this line of thinking further, distinguishing between the immanent content of the act of judging, the quality (force) of that act, and the Sachverhalt as a transcendent target or objectual judgement-correlate. Where acts of presentation have their objectual correlate, perhaps a thing or idea, acts of judgement have a Sachverhalt. Immanent content may be taken as a species, which is termed ideal content, and this may be linguistically rendered as the meaning of an expression. What is more, acts of judgement and presentation are further distinguished:

not only by the presence of a moment of assertion or belief, but also – on the level of what we might call ‘mental grammar’ – by a special (‘propositional’) form. A judgement must ... have a certain special sort of inner complexity, which expresses itself linguistically in the form of a sentence and is reflected ontologically in the form of the Sachverhalt. The expression of a judgement must for example admit of tense and aspect modifications and also of modification by logical operators such as negation, conjunction, etc., as well as by operators such as ‘it is the case that’, ‘it is possible that’, ‘it is necessary that’, ‘I think that’ and so on.

(Smith 1989: 61-2)

The different schools of neo-Kantianism generally rejected the notion of Sachverhalt as the objectual correlate of a judgement, arguing that judgement and cognition are synonymous. For Cohen, the leader of the
Marburg school, for example, judgements are the only way in which being can be posited (Cohen 1902: 6–12). Emil Lask, the Baden School’s main theorist of law and author of *The Doctrine of Judgement* (1912), contended that cognition dismembers the object of experience into fragments of meaning which are then compounded in the act of judgement: cognition and judgement are moments of a single process. The object of cognition is in both cases produced by and in thought in the very process of cognition, with the transcendent object (the empirical world) rendered unknowable. The neo-Kantians therefore had no inclination to develop a detailed account of the structure of perceptual contents as distinct from the structure of judgement of the sort that occupied the phenomenologists and this rendered their works stratospherically abstract. While retaining the neo-Kantian theory of cognition, the early Bakhtin turned to phenomenology to overcome this tendency toward abstraction and theoretism.

**From neo-Kantianism to phenomenology and back again**

Bakhtin’s almost obsessive evocation of the ‘concrete’ was far from unique among neo-Kantians by the 1920s. As the second decade of the 20th began, the influence of phenomenology was being felt within neo-Kantianism itself, resulting in a turn toward patient description. Most affected by this was the Baden School theorist Lask, who was praised by the young Georg Lukács for his work on the historicisation and particularisation of philosophical cognition, all ‘underlain by an essential common drive: the drive to concreteness’ (Lukács 1918: 350). The influence is, however, also detectable in the work of Natorp and Cassirer (Kaufmann 1949). Reciprocally, Husserl’s development after the *Investigations* was in a distinctly neo-Kantian direction, much to the disapproval of the Munich phenomenologists but to the approval of Cassirer. Bakhtin, it seems, was little affected by the development of the later Husserl, but strongly affected by the shift in neo-Kantianism.

The phenomenologist who particularly caught Bakhtin’s eye was Max Scheler, an unorthodox Munich phenomenologist whose bellicose wartime articles glorifying the ‘Genius of War’ made him arguably the leading force in German philosophy in the early 1920s and decisively tipped the balance of philosophical forces in favour of phenomenology. Scheler argued that phenomenology was a new *Lebensphilosophie* (life-philosophy) in opposition to the dead academic philosophies of which neo-Kantianism was a leading representative. Certainly many neo-Kantians followed Scheler’s lead in bringing philosophy into support for
the cause of German *Kultur* against western *Zivilization* and Slavic ‘barbarism’ at this time (though in less violent terms), and this did much to transform the agenda of German philosophy.\(^3\) It is significant that the next notary of Marburg philosophy, the Latvian born Nicolai Hartmann, was a student of Cohen and Natorp but became a critical disciple of Scheler, and Hartmann was in turn succeeded by Heidegger.\(^4\) Hartmann not only shared much of Scheler’s philosophy, but also many of his (and his successor’s) reactionary political views, becoming a leading light in the rabidly nationalistic *Deutsche Philosophische Gesellschaft* (Sluga 1993: 157–61). Bakhtin was also influenced by Hartmann in the 1920s (Poole 2001), though there is no suggestion that the former sympathised or was even familiar with the latter’s political views. The important point is that political as well as purely philosophical factors lay behind the hegemony of phenomenology, now regarded as ‘the academic *Lebensphilosophie*’, over the rather abstract neo-Kantianism in Germany in the 1920s (Kusch 1995: 227ff; Hollowell 1946: 87–106),\(^5\) and this is also true of Russia. In the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution, World War, the 1917 Revolutions and the Civil War fellow-travelling idealists like the Bakhtin Circle acutely felt the need to drive toward the concreteness of ‘life’.\(^6\) This is the agenda that Bakhtin sets in the early *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, and in many ways it motivates his entire oeuvre. The membership of three of the Bakhtin Circle, Bakhtin, Pumpianskii and Iudina in the left-leaning masonic group *Voskresen’* further testifies to their urge to become culturally effective in the life of Leningrad society.\(^7\) Other members of the Circle even became unorthodox but sincere Marxists in the mid 1920s, and it seems that Marxism was an important point of reference for the Circle as a whole. For philosophers coming from the Marburg School tradition, some strains of which was openly oriented toward ‘ethical socialism’, the need for concreteness was felt especially keenly in the realm of ethics. It was here that Scheler and Hartmann had made their main contributions and where the work of the Bakhtin Circle began.

The rise of phenomenology led to a decisive shift toward the descriptive aspects of German legal philosophy over the abstract logicism valued by the neo-Kantians. Bakhtin attacks the ‘law-like morality’ of Kantian ethics and seeks to overcome such disembodied ideas, ‘theoretism’, by reuniting the content-sense of an act with the moment of its performance. In this Bakhtin finds a partial ally in Marxism, where the ‘act-performing consciousness’ can ‘orient itself’, while objecting to its erasure of the *is/ought* dichotomy central to neo-Kantianism (Bakhtin 1994a: 25). Like Cassirer and Lask, he incorporated significant aspects of phenomenology into his work, but was unable to accept the category of
the Sachverhalt without fundamental revisions. In effect, Bakhtin established a neo-Kantian equivalent of the phenomenological Sachverhalt which he calls the ‘event of being’ (sobytie bytiia). Here it is purviews (krugozory), spheres of judgement and object constitution that intersect rather than ontological orbits as such. However, the new category inherits the ethico-juridical properties of the Sachverhalt. With this in place, many of the phenomenological categories derived from Brentanian philosophy, such as cognitive acts and intentionality could be appropriated and revised in a neo-Kantian spirit. In this reworking the intentional act becomes the realization, or ‘embodiment’ of an objectively valid sense (smysl) in ‘life’, making it significant/valid (znachimyi). Eidetic intuition becomes aesthetic vision (videnie) in which bringing an event under aesthetic rules determines a ‘gleam of sense reflected in being’ (Bakhtin 1996c: 180; 1995: 115). In this creative act, it is not what is expressed (represented) that is meaningful (znachimyi) so much as the ‘manner and modality, the inner law of the expression itself. In this law of formation, and consequently not in proximity to the immediately given but in the progressive removal from it, lie the specific character of linguistic as of artistic formation’ (Cassirer 1955: 189). It is this neo-Kantian ‘law of formation’ which comes to govern Bakhtin’s later account of discursive interaction.

Bakhtin’s early work thus departs from the abstractions of neo-Kantian philosophy and embraces the descriptive method of phenomenology but then translates phenomenology back into neo-Kantian paradigm of values and validity. This is made possible by the philosophies’ common juridical framework, but the resulting theory is constantly subject to strain, resulting from their respective, opposing orientations.

From aesthetic act to discursive act

The early Bakhtin pays no great attention to language as such, but he is fundamentally concerned with the laws governing aesthetic activity. In the essay ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’ Bakhtin inaugurates a process in which a characteristic set of authorial practices is presented, before the presence or absence of such features in the practice of certain writers are held to constitute their aesthetic value. In coming to this judgement, Bakhtin divides the practices into legitimate and illegitimate ones by transforming Scheler’s (1954) typology of intersubjective interaction into an account of how the author of narrative literature relates to his or her intended object of judgement (which is no longer
distinguished from an object of presentation) (Poole 2001). This act of judgement is the act of the production of the hero and his or her image-world, which is a paradigm for the production of the cognised world. The image of the hero is fundamentally structured according to the ‘manner and modality’ of the author’s relationship toward him or her, and Scheler is useful inasmuch as he provides a subtle typology of intersubjective interaction which serves as the model for such a modality. The catalogued acts become the processes that give rise to particular instances of narrative form, but this correlation is governed by a priori laws. Whereas for Scheler, a priori laws derive from posited, judged or known Sachverhalte, for Bakhtin they are objectively valid principles governing the aesthetic as a region of culture and which are realised in aesthetic acts. This ‘law’ stipulates the rights and obligations of both author and hero. The author has a duty to engage in a conditional merging of perspectives with the hero, before a ‘return’ to his or her unique place in being from which to bestow wholeness. Failure to observe this results in a violation of the rights of the hero’s ‘legal’ personality or an abdication of authorial responsibility. These illegitimate practices are modelled on Scheler’s notion of idiopathic and heteropathic modes of interaction. In the first case the author imposes his or her own perspective, reducing the hero to a voiceless object and rendering the artistic work into something akin to a treatise. In the second, the author is so besotted with the hero that he or she is unable to find a stable external position from which to bestow artistic wholeness upon the hero, making the latter either aesthetically unconvincing or turning the author-hero relation into an ethical relation.

This last violation results from the incomplete removal of the hero from the ‘open event of being’ or life. Such a removal is constitutive of the aesthetic as such, and Dostoevsky becomes the main example of such a ‘crisis of authorship’. In the 1929 study of Dostoevsky, however, Bakhtin no longer regards Dostoevsky’s work as aesthetically flawed but a new form of democratic novel in which the author no longer judges heroes as objects of an abstract, theorised law. Bakhtin almost obsessively drives home the message that the hero is no longer an object at all, but a subject with full rights, a Rechtssubjekt. Heroes become formally equal subjects of a law that is immanent to the relations between persons themselves: the polyphonic novel. Significantly, however, the Dostoevskian hero is no longer an ‘objectified image, but a fully-weighted discourse [slovo, pure voice; we do not see him, we hear him’ (Bakhtin 1994b: 52; 1984 53): the interaction between seeing, acting ‘persons’ existing on different planes now becomes an interaction
between intentionally impelled discourses sharing a single plane within
the novel. Traditional stylistics and linguistics are criticised for limiting
their attention to relations between discourse and its object (acts of
judgement and nomination) and ignoring relations between one’s own
discourse and that of someone else (chuzhoe slovo) (1994b 83–5; 1984
185–7). Discursive encounters now cast interlocutors as simultaneous
witnesses and judges of the discursive acts of others. Plot now becomes
merely a device to facilitate such encounters between Rechtssubjekte
which are the equivalent of the phenomenological Sachverhalte, and
which are thus open to judgement. However, with the authorial
word on the same level as that of the heroes, there is no longer any
ground from which to adjudicate between the word of the hero and the
world represented therein: any attempt to do so would be subject to a
potentially infinite regress of appeals. This ability to evade final judge-
ment is what Bakhtin calls the ‘loophole’ [lazeïka], that is ‘the retention
for oneself the possibility of altering the final, total meaning [smyśl] of
one’s word’ (1994b 136; 1984 233).

From discursive act to discursive genre

Between Author and Hero and Dostoevsky there is a crucial development:
the discursive casting of intersubjective relations. In this the other mem-
bers of the Circle played important roles. First was Valentin Voloshinov,
whose encounter with Brentanian psychology led to an engagement
with the language theory of Anton Marty and Karl Bühler.10 These fig-
ures had departed from Husserl’s ‘monologic’ notion that meaning-
bestowing acts are either nominal acts directed toward objects, and acts
of judgement directed toward Sachverhalte.11 The former had pioneered
the idea of the primacy of the ‘triggering’ (Auslösung) function of lan-
guage use, arguing that a speaker aims to trigger (auslösen) in the hearer
a judgement or emotion of a given kind. This then became the basis for
an attempt to redescribe von Humboldt’s notion of the ‘inner form’ of
language so that it constitutes the deviation of the intended meaning of
a word, uttered with the aim of triggering a judgement, from that of the
etymology.12 Bühler then revised Marty’s ‘triggering’ function so that rather
than a judgement, the speaker aims to trigger an act of response from the
hearer, and this became the ‘mutual steering (Steuerung) of meaningful
behaviour of the members of a community’ (Bühler 1927: 21). Bühler
also developed the notion of the speech event (Sprechereignis) (later, the
speech act [Sprechakt]), so that it became a Gestalt unit with ‘moments’
of representation (Darstellung), intimation (Kundgabe) and triggering.
This was later termed the ‘organon model’ of the speech act, which was to have a significant influence on, among others, the Prague School and Roman Ingarden. Bühler was combining what he saw as the one-sided theories developed by Husserl, Wilhelm Wundt and Marty respectively, so that the meaning of a word must actively be inferred from its intentional relation to what he called the deictic and symbol fields in which it is set. Bühler constructed his theory of language on the scholastic notion of the sign as *aliquid stat pro alio quo*, something that stands for something else, and this is also the starting point of Voloshinov’s *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. As early as 1923, Bühler had followed Heinrich Gomperz in investigating parallels between linguistic and legal representation (*Darstellung* and *Stellvertretung* respectively), concluding that such parallels are partial and need to be drawn very carefully (Bühler 1923: 286ff). In 1934 he still maintained that certain parallels between the two hold, but more importantly insisted that in practical language ‘sentences are linguistic formulations of palpable states of affairs [*Sachverhalte*] outside of language’. Here Bühler criticized Cassirer and other neo-Kantians for effacing the possibility of ‘indirect mediated coordinations’ between language and *Sachverhalte* (Bühler 1990: 48, 215–16).

Such considerations also lie behind Voloshinov’s insistence that the sign ‘refracts (*prelomliaet*) being in the process of becoming’, but Bühler’s influence is clearest in Voloshinov’s 1926 article ‘The Word in Life and the Word in Poetry’. Here, Bühler’s three dimensional, *Gestalt* model of the utterance is recapitulated along with his two-field theory of the situatedness of the utterance, in which the meaning of an uttered word must be inferred from its relation to discursive and extra-discursive context. The very title of Voloshinov’s article alludes to this bifurcation. Voloshinov argues that the utterance ‘rests’ on the participants’ ‘real, material belonging to one and the same portion of being’. This ‘situation’ becomes the equivalent of Bühler’s *Sachverhalt*, with the deictic field transformed into the shared ‘spatial purview (*krugozor*) of the interlocutors and the symbol field, which predominates in art, as the ‘semantic [*smyslovoi*] purview’. The terms of Voloshinov’s adaptation of the ‘organon model’ is significant. The utterance becomes a ‘social event’ (*sobytie*) encompassing ‘the speaker (author), the listener (reader) and the one of whom (or of which) they speak (the hero)’ (Voloshinov 1995c: 72; 1983: 17). While maintaining the indispensability of the given object of representation, Voloshinov’s shifting the ‘organon model’ into aesthetic terms, modelled on the terms of Bakhtin’s early ‘Author and Hero’ essay, allows that object to be recast as the ‘content’
or ‘theme’ of the utterance, conceived in intersubjective interaction. The
intentionality, or ‘directedness’ (napravленность) of the utterance can
now become a neo-Kantian judgement of being. Voloshinov was equiv-
cocal in drawing the full anti-realist and idealist conclusions from this
development, but Bakhtin was quite prepared to do so, dropping the
whole notion of ‘refraction’, at least in the sense used by Voloshinov.15
The Circle’s main turn to genre is found in Pavel Medvedev’s 1928
book The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship. Medvedev was a special-
ist in literary theory and Kulturkritik, and was to characterize Russian
Formalism as a poor cousin of European (especially Germanic) formal-
ism represented by such figures as Alois Riegl, Oskar Walzel and
Heinrich Wölfflin. In an early draft of MPL, Voloshinov notes that this
movement had been fundamentally affected by Marty’s work on lan-
guage (Voloshinov 1995a: 88; 2004: 233-4), and Medvedev went on to
define the ‘dual orientation’ of genre in precisely the same way as
Voloshinov’s adaptation of what became Bühler’s ‘organon model’:

The work is oriented, firstly, toward the listener and perceiver and at
the determinate conditions of its performance and perception.
Secondly, the work is oriented in life, so to speak, from within, by its
own thematic content.

(Medvedev/Bakhtin 1978: 131; Medvedev 1998: 250)

The typical forms of the whole of such a work are what constitute genre.
The Circle are here developing Bakhtin’s assertion that aesthetic activity
is a necessary moment of all seeing [видение] and production of cultural
forms, with the work of art as such distinguished from other forms
according to the degree of completion by which it is removed from the
ongoing flow of life. This certainly has echoes of Croce’s 1902 Aesthetic
as Science of Expression and General Linguistics, where all utterances, and
not just the artistic ones, are seen to be inherently generic, especially as
this idea was developed in the work of the Vossler School (Tihanov 2000:
99). Medvedev is first to note that genres are not limited to artistic forms
proper, ‘one might say that human consciousness possesses a series of
inner genres for seeing [видение] and comprehending actuality. … It is
impermissible to separate the process of seeing [видение] and understand-
ing actuality and the process of its embodiment in the forms of a deter-
This is then taken up by Voloshinov for whom all forms of utterance may
be treated as genres of various types, ranging from the small, shifting
‘life-genres’ enmeshed in direct social interaction to the crystallised
forms of ‘objective culture’ (ethics, politics, philosophy etc) (Voloshinov 1995b: 314–15; 1973: 96–17). To move on to artistic genres proper, we add another level of completion, a sort of ‘superstructure’ over other forms of culture, an idea derived directly from the aesthetics of Hermann Cohen (Medvedev 1998: 133; Medvedev and Bakhtin 1978: 24).16

**Discursive genres, social acts and jurisprudence**

The influence of the civil law tradition on Bakhtin’s account of discursive interaction can be best illustrated by an examination of the scheme of discursive genres he developed in the 1950s. Here Bakhtin developed the ideas of his now deceased colleagues and his own work on the novel into a general theory of discursive genres. Now partially freed from a literary agenda, and engaging in a descriptive piece of socio-cultural analysis, some of the continuing connections with the philosophy of Sachverhalte become particularly clear. To draw this out, I will compare Bakhtin’s scheme with that explicitly developed under the rubric of a philosophy of civil law in Reinach’s 1913 ‘The A Priori Foundations of Civil Law’.17

Bakhtin argues that unlike units of language, units of discourse are always generic. Those relatively stable types of utterance that prevail in everyday (mostly oral) interaction Bakhtin terms ‘primary’ (or ‘simple’) genres, while those which arise in more complex and organized cultural communication (mostly written) are termed ‘secondary’ (or ‘complex’) genres. The former range from the simplest interjection to rejoinders in a conversation, while the latter include artistic, scientific, or philosophical lectures, monographs or articles. The latter may incorporate primary genres into their very structure. Bakhtin closely connects style with utterance and opposes this to units of grammar like the sentence, for style is language use considered in relation to the whole of an utterance while grammar is related to the linguistic system. Style changes along with changing discursive genres, both primary and secondary, and any new grammatical element is introduced after ‘generic-stylistic testing and modification’. Thus, argues Bakhtin, discursive genres are ‘drive belts from the history of society to the history of language’ (1986a 65; 1996a 165). Their boundaries are set by a change of discursive subjects. When a sentence is bounded by a change of subjects it is transformed into a one-sentence utterance. Every utterance is a link in a complex chain of discursive exchange. Each link in some way responds to the previous one and anticipates the next one and these factors exert a decisive influence on the way each utterance is constructed. Utterances
thus presuppose another, active, participant and this presupposes ‘dialogic relations’ such as those between questions and answers, assertion and objection and the like. As links in discursive communication, utterances must be understood dialogically, as a chain of responses. They ‘mutually reflect’ one another, and this determines their character. Their ‘responsive reactions’ can take many forms, incorporating elements of a preceding utterance and giving them a new accent: ironic, indignant, reverential or whatever. This expresses the speaker’s attitude towards the utterances of another speaker. Traces of this can be found in the finest nuances of the utterance as ‘dialogic overtones’ that define its style. Echoes of preceding and anticipated utterances are thus detectable in the very fabric of every utterance. Central to all this is the ‘addressivity’ of an utterance, i.e. its quality of being directed toward someone. This will depend on whether it is addressed to an immediate partner in dialogue, a collective of specialists, ‘the public’, opponents, like-minded people, a person of subordinate or superior rank and so on. This has an important effect on the shape of the utterance, affecting the selection of vocabulary, stylistic pattern, intonation and the like.

Where Bakhtin argues that the forms of objective culture arise from utterances, Reinach argues that legal structures are products arising from certain processes that he calls ‘social acts’. These are spontaneous intentional acts (i.e. acts directed toward existent or non-existent objects), but which are also other-directed (fremdpersonal). They ‘are performed in the very act of speaking’ and are ‘in need of being heard’ if they are to be successful. Such acts include informing, requesting, commanding, questioning and promising, but would exclude such acts as deciding, forgiving or resolving, which require no announcement to another. While all social acts need to be heard, only some aim for acts of response. While informing does not require any act from the informed, questioning presupposes another social act in response. Thus, social acts may be (a) simple (such as informing), (b) acts which presuppose other social acts and (c) acts which aim at or follow upon other social acts. Underlying every utterance is an appropriate mental state: informing is based on belief, requesting on the wish that what is requested will come to be and so on (1983: 22). Similarly, commanding presupposes a relation of authority (1983: 23). Reinach further distinguishes between types of social acts: there are conditions under which social acts may be performed in proxy, jointly or severally, they may be conditional or unconditional, complete or incomplete. When the mental or other states do not correspond to the social act itself the
result is a ‘pseudo-performance’, such as when a person ‘informs’ someone of something of which they are not first convinced (1983: 22).

The concerns of Reinach and Bakhtin substantially overlap, though their focuses vary. Reinach is openly concerned with the legal ramifications of social acts, while Bakhtin is overtly concerned with the stylistic features of different utterances and the relationship between literary and other genres. Like Reinach’s social acts, Bakhtin’s utterances are other-directed but, unlike Reinach’s acts, all utterances presuppose other utterances, follow upon preceding utterances and anticipate responses of some kind. This difference may reflect the extent to which Bakhtin adopted Marty’s and Bühler’s triggering function of language as a necessary moment of the unified whole that is the utterance. While Reinach’s work predates Bühler’s main work on language, Bakhtin clearly (though without acknowledgement) draws on the latter (1996b: 228). The typical forms of utterance, that is discursive genres, like Reinach’s social acts, settle into culture and are given to the speaking subject who must learn to master them. Like Reinach, Bakhtin does not provide a complete classification of discursive genres, but he does distinguish between simple and complex ones. Unlike Reinach, however, for Bakhtin, this distinction is not functional (1996a 161–2; 1986a: 61–2). Instead, they are correlated with the categories of objective culture and life that ultimately derive from the unorthodox neo-Kantianism and Lebensphilosophie of Georg Simmel.

In some ways the philosophical bases of Bakhtin’s and Reinach’s accounts are diametrically opposed even while their schemes maintain many similarities. Both Reinach’s social acts and Bakhtin’s discursive genres are the means by which uses of language both lead to and reflect changes in the wider social world. For Reinach, social acts are the processes that give rise to institutionally-bound legal structures, but the acts are actually governed by the synthetic \textit{a priori} laws inherent in \textit{Sachverhalte}. These laws constitute the foundation of all institutional forms. For Bakhtin, genres are the ‘drive belts’ between society and language, and while ‘unmediated discursive intercourse’ gives rise to the structures of the secondary genres, these are also governed by synthetic \textit{a priori} laws. However, for Reinach, such laws are not purely logical, they are ‘forms of \textit{Sachverhalte}, not forms of thinking’ (1969: 62–4). They constitute necessary and intelligible relations between certain categories, such as claim and obligation. For Bakhtin, however, the laws constitute precisely such ‘forms of thinking’, they are the logic of certain regions of objective culture such as ethics, aesthetics and science, and so institutional questions tend to be effaced. For Bakhtin, different genres are
different ways of imposing some cognitive order on the ‘unknown X’ that constitutes the Marburg version of Kant’s ‘thing in itself’ and producing some object of knowledge. For Reinach, social acts are as much a part of the world as wardrobes, dogs and helicopters. This is a fundamental difference that can be traced back to Bolzano’s attacks on Kant. As Melchior Palágyi put it as early as 1902, ‘when Kant asserts that the objects have to observe an order conferred upon them by our cognition, Bolzano sets against this another formula, namely that our knowledge has to adjust itself to the truth’ (Nyíri 1989: 374).

Reinach’s *a priori* is ‘intuitively given in the strongest sense. What is grounded in the essence of objects can be brought to ultimate givenness in essence intuition’ (1969: 214–15). Thus, a promise necessarily gives rise to mutually dependent instances of claim and obligation on the part of the promisee and promiser respectively just as a sentence presumes the presence of a verb. Reinach’s ‘realist phenomenology’ seeks to reveal the *a priori* laws governing the production of any positive law. Bakhtin’s *a priori* laws govern the act of evaluation, which is wider than the Marburg School’s logicist judgement of being since what is judged is the *event* of being. This is what Bakhtin means by linguistic units acquiring an ‘event-historical character’ when becoming part of an utterance (1996b: 257–8). Like Reinach, Bakhtin argues that not all discursive acts can be true or false, ‘utterances can propose not logical but another evaluation’ (1996b: 227) and this is linked to the other functions of language. As early as 1929 he had argued that alongside the ‘direct and unmediated intentional word – naming, informing, expressing, representing’ there exists the ‘represented or objectified [ob’éktnoe] word’ (1994a 84; 1984: 186). The first type of discourse is legitimate in the natural sciences where the subject talks about an object, but the second is the object of the human sciences, and here jurisprudential ‘mathematics’ apply (cf. Wittgenstein 1922: §4.113). For Reinach, only judgements and assertions can ‘fit’ *Sachverhalte* since they are based on a *state* (belief), while orders, requests, questions and the like are *episodes* and are incapable of being ‘conforming acts’ (*Anpassungsakte*) (1983: 107–9). For Bakhtin, only certain utterances relate to and are governed by truth or falsity, other utterances relate to other spheres of ‘objective validity’ such as sincerity or beauty, and laws of discursive conduct govern each sphere. The utterance may not be an act of judgement narrowly conceived, but it is always an act of judgement in a wider sense since it realises objectively valid values in an *event*. The utterance’s stylistic features are bearers of evaluative meaning, their intuitable essences are *a priori* laws beyond mere affirmation or negation and which are nevertheless crucial dimensions
of the event of being. The logic of such laws of thought is a dia-logic in that it is the logic of deriving meaning from relations between the intersecting meaningful acts of (Rechts) subjekte.

Yet the conceptions are actually closer together than might appear at first sight. Reinach’s Sachverhalte have distinctly Platonic qualities, being independent of any judgement or cognition, possessing modalities, constituting a special ‘realm’ distinct from that of objects and enjoying an eternal existence (Reinach 1981: 332–54). This has distinct echoes of Bolzano’s Platonic and self-consciously anti-Kantian notion of the objective order, separate from both the knowing subject and language that constitutes the ‘truth in itself’. The categories and the necessary relations between them that constitute Sachverhalte are the foundation of all positive law and all institutions; if isolated from these foundations any positive law or temporal institution would be unsustainable (Smith 1987: 201). For Bakhtin:

The speaker does not communicate anything for the sake of communicating, but has to do so from the objective validity (znachimost’) of that communicated (its truthfulness (istinnost’), beauty, veracity (pravdivost’) necessity, expressiveness, sincerity). Intercourse requires objective validity (znachimost’) (in all its various forms depending on the sphere of intercourse), without it intercourse would degenerate and decay.

(1996b: 221)

Here we see the categories of objective culture similarly being granted a semi-Platonic status with their validity simply assumed. Where Reinach’s social acts realise a priori laws in positive law and its institutions, Bakhtin’s utterances realise a priori categories in what we might call a ‘positive culture’ and its genres.21

The deferral of judgement

For Bakhtin, stylistic features manifest modes of conduct between such Subjekte in specific events of being and these become the aesthetic Rechtsverhalte of the novel. In the 1934 essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’, interacting utterances are incorporated into the novel, which is the secondary genre par excellence (Cohen’s superstructure over ideologies). This allows for the transformation of a language into an ‘image of a language’, which permits its ‘essence’, or the structure of the evaluations embodied thereby, to be intuited. In the novel, the judgement of evaluations, which
is synonymous with the intuition of the a priori laws governing the production of any world of culture, becomes possible. However, the novelist qua novelist now remains silent. He or she becomes the unheard creator of what Bakhtin's colleague Lev Pumianskii called a ‘well-considered social court through a construction of a walk of life, scenes of a life’ (Pumianskii 1929: 11), but judgement is deferred. This deferral has its intellectual origins in the Marburg School idea of the ‘never-ending task’ of ‘producing’ the world from and in thought. Here, however, it becomes a feature of modernity as such, and the novel is in part at least, the self-conscious genre of that modernity.22

This characterisation of modernity is anticipated in Cassirer’s studies of the Renaissance (1953; 1963), and goes back further to Hegelian philosophy (Brandist 1999). Bakhtin follows Cassirer, though adding a populist twist, to argue that those who believe they have knowledge of the world itself, feeling capable of participating in a direct ‘judgement of being’, inevitably display a pretentiousness, pedantry or zealotry. Their reward is the ridicule and exposure of the carnival square: a humiliating reopening of proceedings before the people. A judge must always deal with successive witnesses’ (heroes’) discursive representations of being, not with being itself. In one of his last writings Bakhtin elevates this to an eternal philosophical principle, arguing that each person is both witness (svedetel’) and judge (sudia) in the creation of a ‘super-being’ (nadbytie), the meaning of being (smysl bytiia), that is expressed in the word is regarded as genuine, creative freedom. Similarly, relations between persons leads to the rise of the ‘super-I’ (nad-ia), the witness and judge of the whole human (chelovek), or the other (drugoi) (Bakhtin 1979: 341–2; 1986b: 137).

As we noted above, the novel is a microcosmic paradigm of social being as such. In 1961, the endlessly deferred judgement of the author is linked to the idea of a final judgement as a structural requirement of any utterance. The ultimate, ‘loophole’ judge is cast as the ‘superaddressee’ [nadadresat] ‘the absolutely just responsive understanding of whom is presupposed either at a metaphysical distance or in distant historical time.’ This might take the form of ‘God, absolute truth [istina], the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science’ and so on’ (Bakhtin 1996c 337; 1986c: 126). Since the world is nothing but the systematic and cumulative but perpetually unfinished totality of all representations, the judgement of the world (Weltgericht) associated with the ‘superaddressee’ is actually a type of messianism that derives, at least in part, from the Judaic elements of Marburg neo-Kantianism.

The recent ‘ethical turn’ in Cultural Studies has generally been predicated on the uncoupling of ‘discourse ethics’ from questions of law. Our
investigation suggests, however, that the philosophies that underlie much of this current movement actually insisted on the inseparability of the two questions, and this lies behind the apparent topicality of Bakhtinian thought. The maintenance of this connection preserved a sense of the institutional mediations between the relations between the I and other, even if, as in the case of Bakhtin, this institutional framework was confused with that of aesthetic form. One finds similar concerns with ethics, communication and law in thinkers contemporary with Bakhtin as diverse and influential as Walter Benjamin and Wittgenstein, and these thinkers too posited a perpetually deferred Weltgericht.23 If contemporary Cultural Studies is to avoid descending into an inflated ‘ethicism’ which usurps historical explanation and causal understanding it needs to pay close attention to those philosophies which rigorously delineated the interdependence of ‘discourse ethics’ and law. This is not to say the phenomenologists’ methodological individualism or the neo-Kantians’ idealist logicism should be embraced, but that the problems with which these thinkers were grappling are ones that cannot be avoided if we are to find the appropriate place for social-moral judgements in social and cultural theory.

Notes

1. Voloshinov’s reading in this area was catalogued by Dmitri Iunov in his paper ‘Reconstructing ‘Dialogue’ and ‘Group Individual Psychology’ in the Bakhtin Circle. 1920–1930: Archival and Biographical Evidence’ at the conference In the Master’s Absence: the Unknown Bakhtin Circle, University of Sheffield, 7–9 October 1999.
2. The BGB (§§ 1–89) defines legal subjects (Rechtssubjekte) as natural persons (natürliche Personen = Menschen, i.e. humans) or juristic persons (juristische Personen), the latter of which are subdivided into associations (Vereine) and foundations (Stiftungen). Only the legal subject is capable of bearing rights and obligations and is defined solely as such a bearer. The Rechtsobjekt is any matter or thing (Gegenstand) with which the law is concerned. Rechtsverhältnis is strictly speaking nothing more than a Lebensbeziehung, an actual relationship in life (Fisher 1996: 31–5). On the roots of the Sachverhalt in Roman law and its subsequent absorption into philosophy, see Smith (1989: S. 2).
3. Natorp’s equivocal turn to nationalism is clear in Natorp (1918). On the effects of the war on German philosophy see Kusch (1995: 212–19 passim) and (Sluga 1993: 75ff). Symbolic of the rise of phenomenology over neo-Kantianism was Adolf Reinach’s 1914 lecture (Reinach 1969) at the citadel of neo-Kantianism, Marburg University, in which the Marburg School’s philosophy of cognition was attacked and a ‘realist’ phenomenology advanced. Reinach was himself an enthusiastic supporter of the War, volunteering for active duty and dying at the front.
4. Hartmann was educated in St Petersburg and Marburg before his tenure as professor at Marburg from 1920 to 25.

5. The neo-Kantian who most vociferously opposed Lebensphilosophie was Heinrich Rickert, whose critique appeared in Russian translation in 1921 (Rickert 1998) and was cited equivocally by Voloshinov (1995b: 246; 1973 32). Rickert was a largely isolated figure in this regard.

6. The movement from neo-Kantianism to phenomenology was also recorded in Volkov (2000a). In a letter to the Russian neo-Kantian and fellow student with Hartmann at Marburg, B. A. Fokht, of 28 January 1907, G.O. Gordon noted that Natorp was overjoyed to hear Fokht might take a ‘whole band of students’ to study at Marburg, lamenting ‘they still have not arrived … the youth of Moscow … [head] toward the philosophy of Husserl’ (Vashestov, 1991: 226). It is also significant that the first translation of Husserl’s Logical Investigations was into Russian in 1909. An interesting selection of the early reviews are collected in Chubarov (1998).

7. The group's purpose in the mid-1920s was to support the economic policy of the party but oppose its atheistic cultural policy. On this see Brachev (2000: 178–98).

8. Interestingly, an unpublished, contemporary article by Shpet's colleague Volkov advocates a phenomenological philosophy of Sachverhalte drawing on the work of Brentano, Marty and Reinach (Volkov, 2000b).

9. Bakhtin here draws upon the multiple senses of znachenie as meaning in the sense of the German Bedeutung and valid in the senses of the neo-Kantian Geltung (to hold logically) and Gültigkeit (to be effective).

10. For a detailed discussion of this matter see Brandist (2004).

11. It is important to note that reaction against Husserl's 'monologism' was also led by the Munich phenomenologists Johannes Daubert and Reinach, to whom we shall return. Scheler’s work on intersubjectivity was also an aspect of this, but Scheler showed no great interest in discursive phenomena. It is also significant that Husserl’s champion in Russia, Gustav Shpet, who briefly worked with the Munich phenomenologists and Stumpf, also criticised Husserl for ignoring 'social being' as early as 1914. Like Scheler, he also linked this to the question of ‘empathy and associated acts’. On this see Shpet (1996: 110–11).


13. Wundt’s intimation (Kundgabe) theory of language and the reaction against it is discussed in Nerlich and Clarke (1998).

14. Voloshinov translated Bühler (1926) into Russian in the mid-1920s. Here Bühler outlined his two-field theory and recapitulated his ‘organon model’ in terms of this theory. On this see Voloshinov (1995a: 75).

15. On the differences between Voloshinov’s and Bakhtin’s notion of refraction see Brandist (2004: 116–20,122).

16. It should also be noted that Bakhtin was most likely also influenced by Lev Iakubinski’s 1930–1 writings about the genres of public discourse, on which see Brandist (2003).

17. It is in principle possible Bakhtin knew this work by Reinach, but no evidence to support such a thesis has been forthcoming. The lack of any complete inventory of Bakhtin’s archive does keep the possibility open. Certainly
the work was known in Russia, as the 1926 letter from Volkov (2000a: 119) noted above testifies. It is, however, possible that the influence of Scheler and Bühler was sufficient to bring about such similar ideas.

18. On Reinach’s notion of authority see Mulligan (1987: 62–4)

19. Here and elsewhere, in the 1963 edition of the Dostoevsky book, from which the English translation is taken, Bakhtin replaces ‘intentional’ (intentional’noe) with ‘object-directed’ (predmetno-napravlennoe), thus weakening the Brentanian connection.

20. Again, the influence of Bolzano’s notion of the external context as an eternal, unchanging system of representations, propositions and ‘truths in themselves’ is evident here.


22. I say ‘in part’ here because the novel is also presented as the manifestation of an eternal struggle between mythical and critical thought.


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Rhetoric, the Dialogical Principle and the Fantastic in Bakhtin’s Thought

Renate Lachmann

Introduction

Bakhtin’s thought is characterized by various finely interrelated aspects, such as language (dialogue, polyphony, voice), culture (carnival, laughter), memory, responsibility, and genre (Socratic dialogue, Menippean satire, the carnivalesque mode of writing). Ethical and poetic perspectives are intimately connected. An attempt to force these varied aspects into a closed system would fail to grasp their status as nascent theory, as theory in the process of ‘becoming’, which allows for speculative elements, for incongruity, for ambivalence. Bakhtin is a thinker of creative imprecision, of ingenious ideas that he clads in a highly metaphorical terminology. I will focus on the following aspects:

1. dialogism and responsibility: the word of the other;
2. the specificity of Bakhtin’s rhetoric and the relevance of the Socratic dialogue;
3. the anticlassical penchant in his thinking;
4. the concept of the fantastic.

Dialogism and responsibility: the word of the other

Bakhtin assumes that the structure of the world is dialogic, that within this world the word marks itself as response. Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an active understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse. In the semiotic
collective where author and recipient participate, language circulates neither as an abstract system of linguistic forms, as in the Saussurean ‘langue’, nor as isolated monologic utterances, ‘parole’, but rather as a social event of language – interaction – which comes about in the contact between utterance and counter-utterance. This social event can be conceived as a process of understanding in which signs answer other signs. The dialogic text reproduces this interaction between author and listener, who are depicted as text-internal positions (implied author/implied listener) rather than as text-external ones. The text is inscribed in the speaker/listener structure, the intersection of social and textual experience and the nexus of external and internal speech.

In the dialogic text, present and absent discourse thus constitute an ambivalent meaning resulting from the processuality of the unending formation of understanding creating an ineradicable difference that resists the simplifying, reductive tendency of monovalence. It is an ambivalence that evades the rigidity and normativity of official semiotic praxis. Bakhtin is concerned not with the semantic possibilities of language as such, but rather with the way the meanings sedimented in language interact. For him it is not innovation (destruction), but rather heterogenization (the dispersion and differentiation of consolidated meaning that denies these sedimentations) that creates the free space of ambivalence and polyvalence. Ambiguity may imply the enclosure of the ‘other’ meaning, but it is only that kind of ambivalence that, in enclosing the other meaning, expresses a value position or value decision. Hence in Bakhtin’s conception, the play with the semantic capacity of language cannot guarantee ambivalence, but rather only the ability of the word (as a denial of the one meaning) to evoke other semantic contexts.

In the same way that meaning in the word arises as a semantic explosion in the meeting of two semantic horizons, in the crossing of two contexts, so too the understanding of meaning is an act of contact and crossing. The dialogicity in the word demands a dialogic understanding. Only an active understanding that bears the ‘germ of a response’ in itself can appropriate a point of meaning on the boundary between two contexts. The reader, in the process of understanding an alien utterance, assumes an answering attitude, (s)he attempts to participate in another ‘active and responsive context’. As a result, any true understanding is dialogic.

To understand in semiotic terms is to answer signs by using still more signs. In the word-sign, understanding acquires a material existence, in the act of understanding – in reply and anticipation – the word acquires its dialogicity. Contact (the meaning arising on the boundary between
The writings of Bakhtin are concerned with expounding this concept of meaning, which is directed against abstract objectivism and semantic linguistics. He insistently and vehemently calls attention to the semantic monopoly exerted by a centripetally ordered linguistic and ideological hegemony – a hegemony that threatens the life of the word (and indeed life itself in Stalin's Soviet society). Only the eccentricity of meaning, the crossing of value positions intoned in the utterance can deny the presence of a consensus forbidding centrifugal semiotic acts – acts that create the explosive swirling up of accumulated, potential meaning characteristic of dialogue.

Bakhtin is concerned with breaking up the nodal consolidation of value mentioned earlier. The attempt to disperse the monopoly of meaning, to rend apart the unity of language marks the tenor of Bakhtin's rather subversive linguistic approach. His notion of an irreducible, ultimately irrepressible heteroglossia is oriented towards the idea of a ceaseless 'splitting' movement (rassloenie) that breaks down all meaning (de-stratification). This concept of splitting is closely associated with that of 'intention' (intentsiia). Bakhtin speaks of 'intention' as 'the force that splits and differentiates', as an 'intentional dimension of splitting' and of the 'splitting saturation' (rassloiaiushche nasyshchenie) of language with intentions and positions. The concept of intention, so it would seem, leads back to that of the value position and encompasses the notion of a 'horizon' or 'world view'. The 'social force' that carries out the splitting up of language (that is the plurality of semantic and ideological horizons that take hold of language even as they split it up) leaves behind 'traces'. This splitting saturation manifests itself in the dialogic word, the word 'that lies on the border between one's own and the other', the word that is actually 'half someone else's' (Bakhtin 1981: 321).

The one meaning cannot maintain itself in the face of the many meanings. Bakhtin's concept irritatingly links the atomizing intrusion of the many meanings into the one (an act that atomises this meaning) with the idea that meaning 'explodes' in the contact of two different meanings. In other words: splitting up and differentiation, accumulation and trace must be thought of as occurring in the word simultaneously. The word, which recalls the contexts through which it has passed, records the traces of meaning that were once intoned in it. Each new meaning entering into
the word encounters already existing traces: splitting takes place by way of accumulation, accumulation by way of splitting.

Bakhtin's global model of a constantly growing complex of signs oscillates between anticipated utopia and utopian endstate. His disavowal of a first and last world allows the dialogue to extend into an 'unlimited past' and an 'unlimited future'. Like Derrida, Bakhtin unmasks the 'suppression of the trace', the trace as an arche-phenomenon of memory, the erasing of accumulated and stored meaning. The suppression of the trace is the suppression of the answering structure of the word, of dialogicity as the positing of meaning in translation (Setzung in der Übersetzung). Derrida's arche-writing is the arche-voice of Bakhtin, the voice that always already bears within it the traces of other voices.

Though Bakhtin's and Derrida's concepts seem to belong to entirely different traditions, the affinities are in some aspects striking. If one follows Andreas Kilcher (1993) in placing Derrida's theory in a Kabbalah context on the one hand, and realising the former's participation in the unorthodox tradition of ancient language theory on the other, this coincidence loses its hypothetical hue. Kilcher convincingly shows the extent Derrida's thinking is indebted to Kabbalah as a 'trope of negativity' (as a paradigm of deconstruction, seen retrospectively). Kabbalah, interpretation and tradition in one, cannot be grasped as a retrieval of an original or historical meaning but, rather, appears as a continuous distancing from an imaginary origin and an arche-truth. The infinite interpretation of the absolute scripture, which never reaches its goal, is traced in Derrida's 'différance', as a decentered shift and deferral in time and space. In Kabbalah, tradition as a conservative means of handing down an original truth comes to an end, in its stead, to recuperate what is lost, language is installed. Its task is to foster different modes of interpretation (explanation, discussion, commentary, dialogue) and to undermine every attempt at definite positions, at 'consummatedness' (Bakhtin's zuvershenie). After what has been said it might seem plausible to assume that Bakhtin does not represent a tradition that stems from classical antiquity. This refers to stylistics, genre, language and truth-conceptions.

Heteroglossia, polyphony, the infinite dialogue, the double-voiced word, the non-definition, the indetermination and so on can be associated with unorthodox Greek, but also with Hebraic thought. In his talk at the International Bakhtin Conference in Berlin in July 1999, Brian Poole gave an account of the Judaic sources of Bakhtin's concepts. Poole argued that Bakhtin assimilated some of the ideas of the Russian Jewish philosopher M. I. Kagan, who studied with Simmel, Cassirer, and most importantly, Hermann Cohen. Poole convincingly demonstrated the
adoption of (originally German) terms that became constitutive elements of Bakhtin’s theory. There is another line of Jewish thinking which has been paralleled with Bakhtin’s theorems, that of Emanuel Levinas. (The latter is considered to be, alongside with Gershom Scholem, one of Derrida’s philosophical sources). One could deal with these opaque interdependences by recourse to aspects like memory, hybridization, polyphony. The consonance between the fundamental ideas of these authors is one of the reasons why Bakhtin was so readily adopted by postmodern theorists.

Bakhtin develops his concept of memory against the background of a dichotomy between monologism and dialogism. The dialogic word, as the word of ‘culture’, is the storehouse of living memory; ossified memory (the monument), which imposes the monologic word insisting on a single truth, is a memory codified in law (see Grübel, 1979).

The concept of dialogism is double-edged: it presupposes a speaking-responding (that is reacting) individual and at the same time the self-acting of the word which reacts to the alien word. Language is to be experienced as an interaction of signs neither neutral nor innocent: the word bears the burden of the contexts through which it passed. And every speaker or listener bears the consequences of signs put into circulation, of signs he perceives and answers, of signs he picks up and makes use of for his own ends. He cannot stifle the traces stored in them. He has to face the cultural experience a whole language underwent in its history. Speaking this language and listening to it he unwittingly (or consciously) responds to this experience. The fetters of communication within a given cultural context are rigid. Once the producer and user of signs enters the circle of word and response, of utterance and counter-utterance, no sign is a simple given any longer, but appears as the task to lay open its intrinsic responsiveness. In transferring the idea of responsiveness to cultures, Bakhtin resumes the own-alien paradigm. The contact between cultures results in an interplay of questions and answers which give shape to the own and the alien: ‘We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself ; we seek answers to our own questions in it, and the foreign responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and semantic depths. Without one’s own questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign’ (Bakhtin 1986: 7).

Yet, the concept of carnival culture, meaning the temporary state of a counter-cultural, all comprising activity, can hardly be seen within the framework of dialogism. Whereas the latter describes the reconciliatory aspect of communication, the temper of inversion is one of disruption
and of dissonant voices. It is an upheaval of (collective, authorless) polyphony rather than the calm celebration of mutuality. Responsibility, oriented towards the other word or utterance, implies the (reliable) authorship of the utterance, whereas the eccentricity of the carnivalesque and fantastic utterance tends towards irresponsibility, either because authorship is suspended or because the eccentric ignores the other’s word.

The aesthetic discourse – active, interactive, reactive – in which dialogism unfolds is not a discourse of truth. For dialogue is a process circling around truth without ever being able to grasp it and to articulate it in finite, final and conclusive words. There is always another truth, a counter-truth, interfering. Truth appears to be a project caught in an interplay of multifarious view-points and value aspects. There is only approximation, since the ultimate word is yet ahead. From this perspective responsibility could mean: to be ready for response, to understand the interactive processes taking place in a text, in an utterance and in a single word; to lay open the double- or plurivocality; to respect the tacit sense, the alien voice. Communication is the awareness of a chain of meaning of which every speaker and interpreter is part. This chain is to be kept invulnerable, since it constitutes the memory of a culture. Memory, perhaps, could be conceived of as the only representative of this movement towards truth that appears to be a continuous displacement of the identity of signs. (In such an understanding responsibility cannot be but response.) Bakhtin has it that two aspects of the dialogical model, concerning language and world, are intertwined. The first one is embedded in an ethical realm, that of responsibility and individual response to the other’s word. The second one refers to the peculiar working of dialogism, which transcends the individual, because it is part of a serio-comical tradition of genre in which human culture expresses itself. It is the concept of semantic accumulation and generative memory that links the ethical and the poetic aspects of this theory, a theory of truth in the becoming.

Bakhtin is concerned with seeking out the stylistic traces of ambivalence and double meaning. The principle of ambivalence manifests itself in the stylistic realm in two ways: first, in the contact or hybridization of different languages that hosts a dialogue between them, and second, in the individual word itself, where two positions of meaning or value contact one another – once more in a dialogic fashion. These aspects are summarized by Bakhtin in his definition of the hybridized, dialogical word: ‘What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a
single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages”, two semantic and axiological belief systems’ (Bakhtin 1981: 304).

To repeat a point made above: in communicative terms, the category of the dialogical, which describes a dynamic confluence of meaning, is positive and reconciliatory. On the other hand, if one emphasises the aspect of stylistic friction, that is the difference between heterogeneous styles (as already mentioned the concern here is not only with two styles and languages, but with a plurality of styles and languages), there then arises a more disharmonious chord: the hybrid and the syncretic cause the single, consolidated meaning to disperse, and thus the images of concrete reality cannot congeal in spite of their ‘realism’. The syncretic gesture dissolves semantic cores and at the same time allows meanings stemming from a multitude of different contexts to unfold. The syncretic gesture plays a game with heterogeneous meaning, a game permitted by the mixing together of individual discourse types. In Bakhtin’s interpretation, the novel appears as a freewheeling, unbounded play with meaning that avoids committing itself to any single one, a game that strives neither for identity, nor substance, nor definition.

The specificity of Bakhtin’s rhetoric and the relevance of the Socratic dialogue

Not only Bakhtin’s speculative, but also his theoretical assumptions are closely linked with the rhetorical tradition. Both in his fundamental essay on the novel, and in his books on Dostoevsky and Rabelais, we can see Bakhtin coming to terms with rhetoric as he develops a set of tools for distinguishing his particular object of study. These tools allowed him to differentiate between rhetorical dialogism and the dialogism of artistic prose. The basic criterion for such a distinction was to be found, in Bakhtin’s eyes, in the precise ways that discourse is represented dialogically. He attempted to describe dialogic representation with the help of an opposition between authenticity and inauthenticity (podlinnost vs. nepodlinnost). Whereas authenticity suggests that the interrelation-ship between a given utterance and ‘living language’ is a conscious phenomenon that is drawn into the work of representation (osoznanie sootnesennosti slova s zhiznui iazyka), a fact that means that both every-day activities and cultural memory are included in this interrelationship, inauthenticity, on the other hand, implies that an inauthentic, superficial dialogism is stripped of every possible link with living language in its multilayered nature because of this superficial type’s tendency for
abstraction. It is thus excluded from the ongoing communication of a concrete cultural environment. In Bakhtin's way of thinking, rhetoric acquires a place between purely monological forms of speech, on the one hand, and dialogic forms, on the other. This conception duly recognises the fundamental role that rhetorical forms played in the development of the novel as a hybridized mixture of several genres, just as it underscores the significance of rhetorical considerations in an analysis of dialogic discourse in terms of the utterance of the other (chuzhoe slovo).

What Bakhtin is postulating here is the need to speak in terms of a 'specifically rhetorical double-voicedness' that should be distinguished from the artistic-prosaic double-voiced representation of speech within a novel, a situation where the special orientation toward the form (or as he says the 'image', obraz) of language in all its stratified layers reaches a level of concrete expression (Bakhtin 1984: 213).

It is in the context of his discussions of voice that Bakhtin pushes his theoretical pathos to its very limits. Double-voicedness is not only a means, but an end in itself. Within a work of prose it is no longer just part of a story, but it is the central story of the entire work. In addition, the fact that a dialogue is virtually unfinalizable means that plot, in the Formalists' sense of the word, is also suspended: '[a]ll else is the means; dialogue is the end. A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence' (1984: 252).

It is surely no coincidence if those concepts that are fundamental to Bakhtin's thinking – 'utterance' (vyskazyvanie), 'double-voicedness' (dvugolosost') (which further renders the notions of 'multivoicedness', and 'polyphony' in the context of the novel, where many voices clash), and even the 'rejoinder' (replika) understood in a direct sense, 'inner speech'/outer speech' (vnutrenniaia/ vneshniaia rech'), author, or speaker/hearer – all stress the domain of the voice, and not that of writing or écriture. That such is the case in Bakhtin's thinking can be interpreted as follows: within the voice understood as an answer to the word of the Other, the speaking-I is able to give itself a formula. It is here that a zone of freedom is opened up for contesting the power of writing. The double voice steps in against the written letter, and the oral nature contained in the stylized form of skaz moves in against 'literature' (pis'mennost'). The novel is now seen as the site where a carnivalesque semiotic practice is adopted. In its generic polyvalence, it bumps against literature's great canons while it lets the voices of other texts be heard and dismantles the established hierarchy of literary language through the use of living chaotic discourse. At the moment when a voice can be
located in the forms of double-voicedness and polyphony, the project of voicing the written text turns into a story that is told against readings that fix meanings in stone. Here, instead of reading, we have hearing, as voice and writing drive themselves apart into the two poles of a fundamental opposition. The voice that has been put into writing now begins to speak, while it lets its ambivalent vocal traces be heard against the letter of the law and against everything else that the letter puts down into permanent script.

In the ‘voiced’ text of the novel – and this is Bakhtin’s crucial point – the ambivalent nature of the opposition between the stability of the letter (that is, the permanent tradition of books) and the spontaneity of polyphony is condensed into a tense curve that represents the transgression of generic boundaries and the syncretic melting together of styles and heteroglossia (raznorechie). The polyphonic dissolution of everything that is fixed in meaning but nevertheless continues to affirm its rights, corresponds, on another front, to the ambivalent gestures of the carnival, those gesticulations that let the unofficial and unruly domain break loose from the official realm of rule, without however doing any harm to that same realm.

Of course, the voice will disappear as the rhetorical genres are increasingly entrusted to writing. Such a situation is certainly valid during the silencing of the rhetorical voice that occurred in prose genres where a voice had previously infiltrated. But this is only a written voice that Bakhtin is attempting to unwrite (to descriptualize). The metaphorical reawakening of the voice from its letter-grave is also applicable to the rhetorical voice that had descended into the text. For indeed Bakhtin tried to remove rhetorical characteristics from the voice using conceptual redescriptions that lie outside of the systematic outlook belonging to rhetoric: ‘A number of phenomena belong together in the determination of voice: timbre, pitch, tessiture as well as the aesthetic category of the lyrical and the dramatic. But also: a worldview and the fate of mankind. Man enters dialogue as a unitary voice (tselostnyi golos). He participates in dialogue not only with all his thoughts, but also with his very fate, his entire personality’ (Bakhtin 1984: 293).

Without the notion of voice, it is impossible to grasp what dialogic discourse could be. A given voice is the trace left by other voices. The voice bears all the historical sedimentation of a given discourse, it penetrates to the core of that history and thereby moves that history into the future. A voice has a decentring power, it steps beyond the boundaries normally set for a given semiotic space, those very boundaries that curtail the dimensions of a given discourse as it comes into contact
with other foreign voices. Through discourse, the human voice gives intonation to an evaluatory accent. This is the punctual or transitory ideological judgment that occurs in verbal interaction. Both in its nature as sign and in its materiality, the word of discourse is thus constituted by voice, for it is voice that joins together a person’s psychic interior with the outer social world. Voice exists as a chronotope that is in essence that of an anticipated past and a non-presence.

For Bakhtin the opposition between the authentic and the inauthentic (подлинность/неподлинность) is significant when confronting the dialogical with the rhetorical mode of expression; the former tends to authenticity – which implies the sincere, original, direct, unmediated, the non-artificial – the latter is determined by the opposite. Taking a look at Dostoevsky’s Notes from the Underground, which Bakhtin considers a text permeated by the dialogic principle, this opposition appears to be rather problematic. It seems as though Dostoevsky subverts the Bakhtinian idea avant la lettre or, more correctly, as though Bakhtin misreads the rhetorical devices that make up the ‘dialogicity’ of the underground man’s soliloquy. The plurivocal word of the narrator-hero – the ‘paradoxalist’ – his anticipatory speech, his arguing with the possible utterances of his imaginary interlocutors is but a perfect mimicry. It is in mocking at it that the paradoxalist exhibits his authentic dialogism. The verbal claim for authenticity appears to be a paradox. Authenticity is occluded by its rhetorical implementation. The mockery and clownish inversion of communicative conventions is one of the characteristics of the Menippean satire traced by Bakhtin. The Notes belong to this tradition. The treatment of dialogism therein gives a cynical insight into its подлинность – dialogicity, as it were, is laid bare as a communicative means governed by premeditated verbal strategies. In this text Dostoevsky, Bakhtin’s guarantee of pure dialogism, seems to anticipate a certain incongruity in the theory of his interpreters to come.

V. Linetski’s provocative book Anti-Bakhtin (1994) – to mention just one example – has two goals, to reveal the overestimation of Bakhtin’s theories and to demonstrate in the prose of Vladimir Nabokov a pervasive anti-dialogism, a kind of narrated anti-Bakhtinism. In his review of Linetski’s book I. Peshkov is concerned with expounding the specificity of Bakhtin’s rhetorical thinking. He calls it, very aptly, ‘the scientific exotopy of that [Bakhtinian] science’ (Peshkov 1995). As a matter of fact, the problem of rhetoricty in Bakhtin’s work has been widely discussed in recent Bakhtinology. It is made clear, that Bakhtin’s stance towards rhetoric is by no means conclusive. On the one hand he considers it as a regulative organon that inhibits what could be called spontaneity, on
the other hand it appears to be a permissive energy that allows non-
canonized forms of speech to enter the literary domain of prose. In his
Rabelais-book, Bakhtin comments on the Hyppocratic story of
Democritus (the Hyppocratic letters belong to the Menippean satire) as
follows: ‘[w]e find here laughter, madness, and the dismembered body.
The elements of this complex are, it is true, rhetorically abridged, but
their ambivalence and mutuality have been sufficiently preserved’
(Bakhtin 1968: 361). That is to say, ‘novelistic discourse preserved
its own qualitative uniqueness and was never reducible to rhetorical

In other instances, he praises the rhetoric of the market place, the lan-
guage of curse and obscenity whose vitality enriches and stirs up the stiff-
led und stiffened tone of conventional prose, and he concedes the funda-
mental affinity of novellistic and rhetorical forms: ‘[t]he special
significance of rhetorical forms for understanding the novel is equally
great. The novel, and artistic prose in general, has the closest genetic,
family relationship to rhetorical forms. And throughout the entire
development of the novel, its intimate interaction (both peaceful and
hostile) with living rhetorical genres (journalistic, moral, philosophical
and others) has never ceased, this interaction was perhaps no less
intense than was the novel’s interaction with the artistic genres (epic,

These equivocal judgments are due to a mixing of levels that charac-
terizes Bakhtin’s argumentation. Rhetoric is referred to as a system of
rules, that is a metatext, and, at the same time, as a communicative
mode, a speech habit. This becomes quite obvious when he has to deal
with contemporary critical statements concerning the novel. He has to
minimize the rhetorical impact on the Greek novel in order to legiti-
mate it as a poetic genre with dialogic qualities (here the speech-habit
level is at stake), on the other hand he feels obliged to justify rhetoric as
a set of descriptive and analytical instruments: ‘[t]he point of view that
completely excludes novelistic prose, as a rhetorical formation, from the
realms of poetry – a point that is basically wrong – does nevertheless
have a certain indisputable merit. There resides in it an acknowledg-
ment in principle and in substance of the inadequacy of all contem-
porary stylistics, along with its philosophical and linguistic base, when
it comes to defining features of novelistic prose’ (1981: 268).

Stefania Sini,1 following the intricate double-paths in Bakhtin’s argu-
mentation, puts stress on his notions of violence and the lie that seem
to replace his ambivalent stance towards rhetoric by a clear-cut negative
one. Sini refers to the following passages from Bakhtin’s diary for
12, October 1943 (Bakhtin 1996): ‘Rhetoric, in proportion to its falsity (ritorika, v meru svoei lzhivosti) aspires to provoke real terror and hope. That belongs to the essence of the rhetorical word (these effects were underlined also by ancient rhetoric)’ (1996: 63; trans. Sini), and: ‘[t]he element of violence in knowledge and in the artistic form. An element of lying directly proportionate to the violence. The word frightens, promises, generates hopes, glorifies or insults [...] The preliminary killing of the object is the presupposition of knowledge; the subjection of the world (its transformation into an element of incorporation) is the aim’ (1996: 65; trans. Sini).

Finally, Bakhtin writes ‘[t]he lie – this is the most modern and current form of evil. Phenomenality of the lie. Extraordinary variety and subtlety of its forms. Causes of its extraordinary relevance. Philosophy of the lie. The lie of the artistic image. [...] There is not yet any form of force (of power, of authority) without a necessary ingredient of lie’ (1996: 69–70). Sini comments on that passage: ‘[r]hetoric is no longer a historical form of dubious credentials; it has become something else. It is now the spectre, propaganda, and the lie’ (Ms. p. 9).

It is obvious that Bakhtin’s moral rejection of rhetoric as a tool of oppression and betrayal owes its sinister tone to actual experience. Throughout his lifetime, he witnessed the fatal and diabolic perversion of speech, printed and publicly uttered. (Here, the aspects of vitality, energy, polyphony, hybridity are abandoned altogether – as is the metatextual, descriptive level of rhetoric.)

The anticlassical penchant in Bakhtin’s thinking

What Bakhtin misrecognises, is the coexistence of official and centripetal rhetoric with an unofficial and centrifugal tradition of rhetoric. He underestimates the importance of a non-classical and mannerist tradition that can be found alongside the classical rhetorical tradition based on decorum. Such a deviant tradition can be clearly seen in the culture of the concetto that was so prevalent in the 17th century, for example. It was precisely the teachings based on the refinement of the concetto, a set of principles articulated in an unclassical meta-text of rhetoric, that brought forth the very possibility of tropical expression steeped in dialogism. It is these principles that belong to the context of what Bakhtin says about dialogism (Lachmann 1994). These are forms such as lusus verborum (playing with words), bold or live metaphors, hyperbole, oxymoron and the abundant use of neologisms that confront the normative values put forth by the laws of decorum. Their context is
one in which a dialogic potential can develop in semantic configurations of extreme proportions, that is, in the absence of the norms of measure and harmony.

But there are, of course, more obvious connections with rhetoric. We can start by going back to his terminology. Bakhtin adopts rhetorical terms such as *syncrisis*, *anacrisis*, *enthymeme* and *trope*. In those very instances where no explicit rhetorical terminology appears, we can nevertheless point to his general conceptual attitude that is profoundly rhetorical. Metaphorical phrases such a ‘the word with a sideward glance’ (*slovo s ogliadkoi*) or ‘the word with a loophole’ (*slovo s lazeikoI*), we regularly find in Bakhtin's writing, add new concepts to the existing arsenal that rhetoric always had; moreover, his metaphorical terms illustrate certain phenomena that lie outside of the reaches of codified rhetoric.

Still further, a connection with a particular aspect of ancient rhetoric can be drawn at another key point. It is well-known that Bakhtin elaborates his concept of dialogism in the context of a discussion of Socratic dialogue, a dialogue form whose main characteristics, as far as Bakhtin's point of view is concerned, could be summarized using the following quotation: ‘[a]t the base of the genre [the Socratic dialogue] lies the Socratic notion of the dialogic nature of truth, and the dialogic nature of human thinking about truth. The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth ...’ (1984: 110).

In addition, Bakhtin places much stock in the fundamental devices of *syncrisis* and *anacrisis* (figures that Plato, through his master of dialogue, Socrates, sees consisting in the bringing together of various points of view within a single theme and in the reworking of characters' opinions into dramatic scenes). He lists the genres that are fundamental to the Platonic dialogues: *diatribe*, *soliloquy*, *symposium*. The latter is a genre that professes its ‘rights to certain license, ease and familiarity, to a certain frankness, to eccentricity, [and] ambivalence’ (1984: 120).

Bakhtin's conception of truth and dialogue is strongly influenced by the Platonic variant of rhetoric. This hypothesis could be supported referring to recent research in classical philology, devoted to the semantic structure of Plato's dialogues. The metaphor of ‘wandering’ (*plane*) lies at the very heart of the argumentative devices used in Plato's Dialogues, and of his figurative language. The particular forms that dialogue assumes in this writing, especially in the earlier dialogues, are circular in shape.

The Constance classical philologist Gerhard Baudy² refers to a dialogic art the sophists cultivated, the *eristika*; its goal consisted in driving the
opponent into an *aporia* by means of a complicated argumentation. In Plato's *Dialogues* this art has become a literary genre. The Socrates of Plato’s early Dialogues, though apparently a mighty critic of the sophists, makes use of the same eristikia. He becomes the master of the *plane*. In Plato’s later *Dialogues* *aporia* is not the end of the dialogue, but a passage.

Plato not only uses the metaphors of wandering in a structural way; he also uses them on the lexical level. Now the metaphoric configuration that originated in the tradition of a particular cult devoted to Apollo is realized in a labyrinth-dancing. Plato’s metaphoric language, couched in images of wandering, is closely linked to the notion of being-on-the-move-to-somewhere-else. This is an observation that is confirmed by Socrates in the *Phaidon* dialogue. A cathartic function is attributed to this state of wandering, this state of moving-in-a-circle that characterises any search for the truth. Once the image of a dance carried out in a maze has been transformed into the linguistic dance of actors who engage in a dialogue with one another, then this image comes very close, without ever managing to reach it entirely, the truth in which Bakhtin sees the very essence of dialogism.

Both Plato and Bakhtin are part of the same tradition of un-dogmatic, anti-sophist and polylogical rhetoric that remains forever open and unsettled in its treatment of the ‘ultimate questions’: ‘nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future’ (Bakhtin 1984: 166).

The Socratic dialogue and the Menippea are ‘two genres from the realm of the serio-comical’, the *spoudogeloion* (1984: 109). Bakhtin here unites two incongruent traditions: the anti-sophistic tradition of the Socratic dialogue and the Menippea which emerged from the sophistic tradition: He combines the classical with the anticlassical. In the Greek and Roman controversy about styles the latter is termed asianism. Asianism is conceived of as a stylistic mode that encompasses excessive word play, exuberance, eccentricity, pomposity on the one hand, préciosité on the other, and last not least the fantastic. Eduard Norden, arguing from a ‘classical’ perspective, calls the asianic style ‘a degenerative version of Greek literary prose’ (Norden 1909: 126). He insists on the relation between the so-called neoterism (new style) and the old sophistic tradition. Referring to Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* (VIII, 3) he quotes the latter’s account of the ‘defects of this insane eloquence’. In characterizing the asiatic mode as a ‘speech that dissolves in a bacchic
vertigo and a nebulous fantastic’, and as ‘a speech of excessive pathos, that transgresses the boundaries between poetry and prose’, Norden resumes the negative topica of the ancient critics. (Norden 1909: 409). More recently Erich Burck qualifies the asiatic rhetoric as a phenomenon that is not bound to certain genres or epochs. Analyzing the epics of the Roman Caesarean period he adopts the ‘modern’ term of mannerism in the definition introduced by E. R. Curtius. In contradistinction to Norden, Burck’s characterisation is positive; he stresses the stylistic refinement (semantic shifts, intense expressiveness, metaphoricity, the construction of sophisticated arguments which often rely on dialogism), the preference for wild excess, ecstasy and extreme situations (Burck 1971). To return to our point: Since the Menippea emerges from the sophic tradition and not from that of the Socratic dialogue, it seems obvious that Bakhtin conflates two genres belonging to different traditions. Interesting in this respect is the fact that his typology converges in crucial points with the characteristics, either positive or negative, of asianism and mannerism. The Menippea in his understanding excels in hypertrophy of style, it lays bare its own rhetorical apparatus, it abounds in tropes and figures such as oxymoron, antithesis, paradox, inversion. In the richness of allusions and quotations, the Menippea is to a high degree an intertextually organized genre.

For Bakhtin Menippean satire is a productive genre, because it engendered what he termed ‘carnivalized literature’ and the ‘polyphonic novel’. A chain of authors from Rabelais to Dostoevsky, including representatives of the fantastic such as Jean Paul, E.T.A. Hoffman, Gogol, E. A. Poe, testify to its durability. Bakhtin’s idea of the uninterrupted working of the Menippea is grounded in his concept of genre memory:

A literary genre, by its very nature, reflects the most stable, ‘eternal’ tendencies in literature’s development. Always preserved in a genre are undying elements of the archaic. True, these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant renewal, which is to say, their contemporization. A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre. This constitutes the life of the genre. Therefore even the archaic elements preserved in a genre are not dead but eternally alive; that is, archaic elements are capable of renewing themselves. A genre lives in the present, but always remembers its past, its beginning. Genre is a representative of creative memory in the process of literary development. Precisely for this
reason genre is capable of guaranteeing the unity and uninterrupted continuity of this development.

(1984: 106)

The traits which Bakhtin attributes to Menippean satire are derived from his reading of Lucian, Apuleius, Petronius: ‘Characteristic of the Menippea are violations of the generally accepted, ordinary course of events and of the established norms of behavior and etiquette, including the verbal. Scandals and eccentricities destroy the epical and tragical integrity of the world, they form a breach in the stable, normal course of human affairs and events and free human behavior from predetermining norms and motivations’ (1984: 116).

The Menippea mixes this world with the underworld and upperworld, upsets time order, converses with the dead, allows for states of hallucination, dream, insanity, metamorphosis and so on.

The concept of the fantastic

Laughter provides the force of the Menippea, it is its carnivalesque essence. In Bakhtin’s list of characteristic traits of the Menippea the fantastic plays a constitutive role. For instance: ‘[t]he element of the fantastic is introduced in order to create extraordinary situations in which to test the truth and its bearers’; or ‘experimental fantasticality’, ‘organic combination of philosophical dialogue, lofty symbolism, underworld naturalism and fantastic adventure’ (1984: 113).

Despite the reservations made by representatives of recent classical philology concerning the historical and philological tenability of Bakhtin’s claim (Rösler 1986), his project of an alternative literary history based on the assumption of a Menippean tradition that grew into what he called ‘carnivalized literature’, revealed the continuity of a cultural semantics hitherto unnamed, or, at least, underestimated. The categories he introduced in order to characterize the essentials of carnivalized literature – which is more of a mode of writing than a definable genre – ‘familiarity’, ‘eccentricity’, ‘mesalliance’, ‘profanation’, are meant to highlight semantic and structural specifics which neither rhetoric nor stylistics paid attention to.

‘Familiarity’ means the contamination of themes and forms, the subversion of a hierarchical structure, the merging of different levels of meaning; ‘eccentricity’ means the movement of the text, which pushes away from the middle, blows apart the layers of meaning and prevents them from coming to rest. A centrifugal structuring of the search for
truth thereby emerges, making use of the polyphonic or dialogical principle. ‘Mesalliance’ means coalitions that cross the divisions between the social spheres and dismantle the existing value system (which includes the decorum of form). ‘Profanation’ means the turning upside down of the existing order of things and signs. The relation of signifier and signified is displaced, as signs are detached from their reference. In inverting what is actual and given, profanation creates an oxymoronic semantic of (fantastic) ambivalence (Lachmann 1997).

The concept of the fantastic attains a new dimension in Bakhtin’s terming it ‘experimental’, which means transgression or shift of boundaries, the investigation of the unknown, sensation of form and content. It encompasses motifs like the grotesque body, or grotesque soul, and exquisite constructs of thought. Bakhtin insists on two closely linked aspects of the serio-comical–carnivalistic: experience and free invention. Whereas experience means curiosity, quest, and trial, as well as to engage in processes of discovery watching the world turned upside-down, free invention is an unfinalizable mental experiment challenging the accepted truths by suggesting the possibility of another way of looking at them, including the paradox, perhaps even the impossible. ‘Experimental fantasticality’ is the notion for this operation that means both, to shift one’s point of view of the existing world, and to imagine (to fancy) non-existing domains. In his Dostoevsky book he elaborates on this point: ‘In the Menippea a special type of experimental fantasticality makes its appearance, completely foreign to ancient epic and tragedy: observation from some unusual point of view, from on high, for example, which results in a radical change in the scale of the observed phenomena of life; Lucian’s Icaromenippsu or Varro’s Endymiones (observations of the life of a city from a great height). This line of experimental fantasticality continues, under the defining influence of the menippea, into the subsequent epochs as well – in Rabelais, Swift, Voltaire (Micromégas) and others’ (1984: 116).

The experimental fantastic, it seems to me, is – in conjunction with the carnivalesque – the leading concept of Bakhtin’s transgressive rhetoric. And it is not by chance that the experimental fantastic meets with the fantasticheskoe, which lies at the bottom of Dostoevsky’s poetology. Dostoevsky’s fantasticheskoe allows a description of that structure of events (crime, scandal, sensation) that snubs every expectation and damages the rules of probability and suitability, and that corresponds to a type of representation aiming at formal discrepancies and backing not concision but exuberance and stylistic hypertrophy. In Dostoevsky’s version of realism, the fantastic functions as a central element in a project
concerning reality, in whose service it is not so much the compositional conventions of the realists that have to act, but, rather, ‘suspense’ (zanímatel’ nosti) in the sense of a formal principle – producing structures of escalation, breaking off, and rupture.

The fantastic could be termed the heretic version not only of the concept of reality but also of fiction itself. It does not submit to the rules of fictional discourse a cultural system establishes or tolerates; it transgresses the exigencies of the mimetic grammar (otherness does not appear to be subject to mimesis); it disfigures the categories of time and space (fantastic chronotope) and causality. It discards and subverts the validity of fundamental aesthetic categories such as appropriateness (decorum, aptness). Furthermore, the counter- or rather crypto-grammar of the fantastic takes refuge in wild procedures of semiotic excess and extravagance (the ornamental, the arabesque and grotesque). The structure of its plots abounds in escalation, culmination, exorbitant happenings and actions (the marvellous, the enigma, the adventure, murder, incest, metamorphosis, return of the dead). Its protagonists seem to be constantly troubled by eccentric states of mind (hallucination, anguish, fever dream, nightmare, fatal curiosity).

The experimentality in Bakhtin’s fantastic refers to otherness as the unknown/ and the known, the extracultural/ and the cultural, the forgotten / and the returning. The fantastic experiment recalls, reconstructs and points to an occluded, covered memory; the fantastic experiment confronts culture with its oblivion, or rather: it appears to be the other of official culture. It is experience and free invention that trigger the fantastic in Bakhtin’s project. The fantastic surfacing in the ludic, grotesque, eccentric facets of the serio-comical genre, and approaching to the ‘ultimate questions’, makes truth an adventure, an adventus.

Notes

1. Stefania Sini gave this as a talk on the Berlin Bakhtin conference, mentioned above. She was so kind to let me have her paper from which I quote.

References


Bakhtin’s Triadic Epistemology and Ideologies of Dialogism

Sigmund Ongstad

Introduction

Searching in the vast literature explaining and spreading Bakhtinian thoughts it is hard to find commentators who actually see Bakhtin’s work or any other work in the Bakhtin Circle as mainly triadic, that is, seeing utterance, genre and communication as dynamics of structure, reference and action. The overall dominant classification or framing of his work is dialogical (indeed in many different versions) and never in any deep sense triadic. This is quite thought-provoking given that probably his most quoted work, ‘The Problem Of Speech Genres’ (Bakhtin 1986) explicitly establishes a theory or framework of communicational triads.

Since the trilemmatic nature of communication is crucial for any theory of validity or general theory of science (Wissenschaftstheorie) and for any text based research and discipline, it seems necessary to confront dialogical and triadic understanding with each other (Habermas 1984; Bordum 2001). It is important to clarify whether this is a question of incompatibility, not only in relation to Bakhtin’s own work, but even more so, in relation to the many influential approaches that see his work as dialogism. Thus, in the following I will present different conceptions of dialogism, carefully read through Bakhtin’s rather dense essay on speech genres, spelling out, step by step, his triadic view, and finally problematise relations between the two.

Perceptions of ‘dialogue’ and dialogisms

Bakhtin and most of his followers use the notion of dialogue both in broad and specific senses. When defined narrowly, it often refers to
specific aspects of language such as double-voicedness, alien words and parody. Used more generally, it may refer to a model of the world or existence or as an epistemology or a critical alternative to other approaches (Lähteenmäki 1998: 75). Morson and Emerson (1990: 49) underline that even if dialogue as ‘a model of the world’ is seen as some kind of interaction, it should not be taken as a synonym for interaction, neither in a Buberian I–Thou relation nor as a Hegelian/ Marxist dialectics. Further, Holquist in his influential book Dialogism (1990), relates dialogue to aspects such as existence, language, novelness, history and poetic, and authoring. Moreover, a Danish scholar, Nina Møller Andersen, focusing on Bakhtin as a pragmatician, summarises the dialogical principles broadly: in relation to language, interaction, existence, and theories of polyphony, carnival and utterance (Andersen 2002: 45). Finally, in secondary literature Bakhtin’s dialogism as a phenomenon is conceptualised semantically as the dialogical principle (Todorov 1984; Andersen 2002), the dialogical perspective (Dysthe 1999), a dialogical approach (Lähteenmäki 1998) or as the dialogical alternative (Wold 1992).

There are, however, critics, both of Bakhtin and his mediators. Hundeide (1999: 56–7), although generally positive to the potential of a dialogical alternative for the field of psychology, misses three aspects in what he calls a neo-Vygotskian trend that gives priority to ‘the verbal dialogue oriented approach’: the activity aspect, the content, and the emotional aspect. In the discussion below I will return to these aspects, asking if it is a mere coincidence that he misses these particular three.

In an article, focusing on dialogisms as epistemology, Erik Dop (2000: 8) first criticizes Morson and Emerson (1990) for their interpretation of Bakhtin’s ‘truth as dialogic’ and then Holquist (1990) for his view on ‘dialogism as a form of “relativity”’. Dop claims that Morson and Emerson ‘… misappropriate both the relationships between dialogue and dialectics, and between dialectics and dialogics, not only in regard to Bakhtin’s conception of the nature of the truth, but also in his very concept of dialogics’ (2000: 17). For Bakhtin, dialectics is an abstracted form of dialogue. Dialogue refers to the utterance as an act, while the dialogic is the dynamic epistemic structure according to which the act functions. According to Dop, Morson and Emerson blur the particularity and universality of utterances. They remove the ‘abstract scientific cognition’ or ‘abstract thought’ from the subject, and what is kept is the individual ‘I myself’ and ‘thou and he’. Hence what remains is a dialogical theory of truth that concerns itself solely with the particular (2000: 18). Dop is further critical of ‘looseness’ or more precisely what
Morson and Emerson themselves call 'un-systematicism', which seems to become the essence of dialogic thinking. A similar critique was advanced by Hirschkop (1990).

Dop’s critique of Holquist is related to his conceptualization of dialogism as relative and not systematic. The relativity of dialogism is related (by Holquist) to Einstein’s theory of relativity (‘dialogism is a version of relativity’) which, Dop suggests, Holquist mistakenly has seen as the same kind of never-ending relationality as dialogue, and not (just) a metaphor. This misinterpretation (among others) leads to the problem of how truth is related to meaning:

The dialogic nature of language entails that there is a triadic structure to the understanding of and response to the utterance; there is the author of the utterance (first party) and the addressee (second party), and the superaddressee (third party) … .

In other words, for an utterance to mean, that is, for an utterance to be understood, it has to ‘respond’ to an ‘objective judgement’: the superaddressee, or the universal’. (Dop 2000: 31)

This claim is backed up by a long quote from Bakhtin (1986: 126), who writes about the ‘problem of the text’ and states that the third party is not mystical, but a constitutive aspect of the whole utterance, that under deeper analysis can be revealed in it. I will return to this crucial point in my discussion.

Dop’s overall conclusion is that Morson and Emerson along with Holquist have put forward interpretations of Bakhtin’s dialogism where ‘abstract scientific cognition’ has been removed from the subject: ‘Both views reduce Bakhtin’s epistemology to just talk between persons without an architectonic centre to appeal to, so that no truth is possible, and no meaning is possible’ (2000: 33).

From literary theory to interdisciplinary application

The problems with applying Bakhtin in a wider context are manifold, among which are his style of writing, the continuous reformulations over time, a seeming lack of systematicity, his own focus on ‘problems’, such as the problem of the speech genres, the problem of the text, or the problem of dialogic relations, the last ‘problem’ dealt with in Bakhtin (1986: 124–8). All these patterns hinder straightforward, simplistic ‘operationalisations’ of his work (not to mention Bakhtin’s own
reluctance in that respect). Another challenge is the quite widespread ideological reading of Bakhtin, especially the tendency to explain or label the totality of his work as ‘dialogism’. Rather, much of Bakhtin’s work could be read as ‘questions’ just as much as ‘answers’. Hirschkop is even more constructively critical holding that: ‘We would be in a better position to interpret his success if we are willing to acknowledge his failures’ (1997: 67).

After a long period of predominantly literary application of Bakhtin’s ideas we now face more general interest. Just to mention some few titles and tendencies: Bakhtin in Contexts: Across the disciplines (Mandelker 1995), Bakhtin as Pragmatician (Andersen 2002, my translation from Danish), Bakhtin (and Rommetveit) as alternative to cognitive psychology (Wold 1992), Bakhtin and learning (Dysthe 1996, 1999) and so on. Such expansions are promising, but epistemologically challenging. In a Bakhtinian spirit I will address a major problem inherent in Bakhtin’s own work that will become a crucial epistemological issue when moving from literature to general application, the logic of communicational triads versus the ‘nature’ of ‘dialogue’.

As we have seen, a clear tendency in the reception of Bakhtin’s dialogism seems to be a downplaying of content, or rather, an overestimation of the role of the two poles ‘I’ and ‘other’ in dialogue. The third, the alien word (chuzhoe slovo) is often lost, according to Andersen (2002: 110). The ideology of dialogue as metaphor tends to force its users to think mainly in twos, based on the favoured focus on utterers and receivers, including the idea of responding and rejoinding, or what one may call a dyadic ideology, against which Morson and Emerson warned. Thus, monologism becomes a practice opposed to dialogism, often understood as one voice/mind/text versus two voices/minds/texts. Even presumably well-informed theorists who actually try to avoid the fallacy of simplicity seem to be trapped by the gravity of the two.

Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue encompasses much more than the process of interlocutors’ taking sequential turns in conversation. It applies to any phenomenon in which two or more ‘voices’ come into contact. The voices may be those of two individuals engaged in overt dialogue (Voloshinov 1973), those of an author and a character in ‘novelistic’ discourse (Bakhtin 1981), or those of two conflicting positions in intrapsychological, internal functioning (Voloshinov 1973, 1976; Wertsch 1985: 225).

By claiming that there is a tendency to reduce main aspects to two, in theory as well as in practice, I am not suggesting that the prefix dia- means two, but that the inherent logic of dia-, meaning from one to
another or between (two), favours versions of dialogism which often lead to epistemological reductionism. When this to-from ideology becomes the metaphorical and practical key point, other Bakhtinian notions such as chronotope, heteroglossia, intertextuality and voices (in the plural) have a hard time counterbalancing the gravity of simplistic ‘dialogue’ and in consequence its inherent dyadic epistemology. The extreme openness in much of Bakhtinian thinking, that actually should work in the opposite direction, ironically seems on the other hand to contribute to the *polarization* of the *mono-* as opposed to the *dia-* because it becomes a seemingly safe starting point working with literary texts, students’ texts, classroom discourse and so on.

Who should be blamed for such over-simplifications, Bakhtin and/or his interpreters? I will try to show how both parties may have contributed to the problem. There is among his interpreters a severe ignorance of a set of certain important coherences in Bakhtin’s work. Hence my first thesis is that a basic understanding in some of Bakhtin’s writings is triadic thinking, not ‘just’ dialogism, and that most interpreters have failed to see that or have not related them reciprocally. My second is that this triadic thinking opposes central aspects of most versions of dialogism in a way that is not taken fully into account, even, partially at least, by Bakhtin himself, and especially not by the many who have just touched upon the issue, though there are tendencies to bring these two closer or to criticize the simplicity of ‘just dialogue’ (Evensen 2002; Smidt 2002). In the following I will firstly outline the triadic thinking found in ‘The Problem of Speech Genres’ by a close reading of it, and relate the findings to triadic aspects in some other works. Secondly I will problematize and discuss some implications in relation to different versions of dialogism.

**The triadic nature of the utterance (and hence genre)**

Bakhtin’s article consists of two parts, a short part titled ‘Statement of the Problem and Definition of Speech Genres’ and a longer part called ‘The Utterance as a Unit of Speech Communion: The Difference Between this Unit and Units of Language (Words and Sentences)’ (1986: 70–100) which I will concentrate on. I mention these sub-titles since they hint at contexts that may become somewhat blurred by focusing on triadic aspects.

Bakhtin argues that in real life dialogues, which are the simplest and most classic form of speech communication, the (inter-)change of speaking subjects that determines the *boundaries* of the utterance, is
especially clear. Although most cases will be much more complex, one can still in principle hold that ‘the change of speaking subjects, by framing the utterance and creating for it a stable mass that is sharply delimited from other related utterances, is the first constitutive feature of the utterance as a unit of speech communication, a feature distinguishing it from units of language’ (Bakhtin 1986: 76).

This feature is what, given lack of an appropriate nominalisation coined by Bakhtin himself, will call delimitation, that is creating and marking a new link in the chain of communication. Accordingly the second feature, finalization of the utterance, Bakhtin’s own concept, is inseparably linked to the first, delimitation. A criterion for finalisation for Bakhtin is the possibility of responding to it. There has to be a search for a certain finalised wholeness of an utterance. This wholeness is determined by three aspects (or factors) that are inseparably linked in the organic whole of the utterance: 1. semantic exhaustiveness of the theme; 2. the speaker’s plan or speech will; 3. typical compositional and generic forms of finalisation’ (Bakhtin 1986: 76–7).

In some spheres (and hence genres) this exhaustiveness (the first aspect) is almost complete, while in others it is only relative, depending among others on the authorial intent of the utterer, which brings Bakhtin to the second aspect, the speaker’s speech plan or speech will, what the speaker wishes to say. This plan determines the choice of the subject itself, as well as its boundaries and its semantic exhaustiveness. It is not quite clear what this aspect is: ‘This plan – the subjective aspect of the utterance – combines in an inseparable unity with the objective referentially semantic aspect ...’ (Bakhtin 1986: 77). He adds that other participants, knowing the context, can grasp this plan or will.

The third aspect, which he underlines is the most important (in the context of his article), is the stable generic forms of the utterance, and it will be manifested primarily in the choice of a particular speech genre (Bakhtin 1986: 78). Here Bakhtin makes it clear that both utterances and genres are constituted by this aspect: ‘We speak only in definite speech genres, that is, all our utterances have definite and relatively stable typical forms of construction of the whole.’ On the following pages Bakhtin discusses relations of form in sentences, in utterances, and in genres directing his arguments towards the third feature of the utterance: ‘... the relation of the utterance to the speaker himself (the author of the utterance) and to the other participants in speech communication’. Bakhtin explains that the utterance as a link in the chain of communication is ‘... the active position of the speaker in one referentially semantic sphere or another’ (Bakhtin 1986: 84).
Again Bakhtin is not easy to catch, and I have interpreted the concepts ‘relation’ and ‘position’ as the two most important in the two utterances above. This is what I have suggested to conceptualize as **positioning**, which accordingly is the dynamic and simultaneous relation between the speaker, the others and a semantic sphere (a referential content). However, to make sense of this interpretation one has to combine his statement that ‘... each utterance is characterised primarily by a particular referentially semantic content … this is the first aspect of the utterance that determines its compositional and stylistic features’ (Bakhtin 1986: 84) with what he says about ‘composition and style’ in the introduction (Bakhtin 1984: 60). I here see a logical need for Bakhtin, at this point in his essay, having defined both the beginning (delimitation) and the end (finalization) of the utterance, now to outline the ‘middle’, and this is what he seems to call the compositional and stylistic features in addition to thematic content.

The second (sub-)aspect that determines the style and composition of the utterance, is the speaker’s subjective-emotional evaluation of the referentially semantic content of it, the **expressive** aspect (Bakhtin 1986: 84). In the following pages Bakhtin explains the basic function of expressivity, and again dwells on the difference between word, sentence, language (the linguistic aspects) on the one hand and utterance and genre on the other. Among other things he claims that expressive intonation belongs to the utterance and not to the word (Bakhtin 1986: 86) and that emotion, evaluation and expression are foreign to the word of language (and is first born when used in utterances) (Bakhtin 1986: 87). Expressivity exists everywhere: ‘There can be no such thing as an absolutely neutral utterance’ (Bakhtin 1986: 84). In this context the concept of word in its different forms is important: ‘... one can say that any word exists for the speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an other’s word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other’s utterance; and finally, as my word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued in my expression’ (Bakhtin 1986: 88).

On page 90 he reaches an intermediate conclusion: the expressive aspect is a constitutive feature of the utterance, and, as he already has shown, this cooperates with the theme to establish the utterance: ‘Thus the utterance, its style and its composition are determined by its referentially semantic element (the theme) and its expressive aspect, that is, the speaker’s evaluative attitude toward the referentially semantic element in the utterance’ (Bakhtin 1986: 90).
However, this is not his last word on the subject. It immediately becomes clear that Bakhtin, in direct opposition to stylistics as an academic field (of the time), is consciously striving for a triadic view of the utterance: ‘Stylistics knows no third aspect’ (Bakhtin 1986: 90). Bakhtin goes on to explain why style-content thinking is inadequate. The point of departure for his final argument is (again) that, as regards a given matter, the utterance occupies a particular definite position in a given sphere of communication: expression and content are responses from similar aspects in related utterances (Bakhtin 1986: 91). This is at the heart of his dialogism, and in the following pages he approaches his final destination, that the entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering a response from others (Bakhtin 1986: 94). Hence he can claim: ‘An essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone, its addressivity’ (Bakhtin 1986: 95).

Bakhtin further explains how on the one hand grammatical sentences are directed toward nobody, and how all speech genres, on the other have their own typical conception of an addressee, which defines them as genres (Bakhtin 1986: 95). Accordingly Bakhtin now concludes: ‘Thus, addressivity, the quality of turning to someone, is a constitutive feature of the utterance; without it the utterance does not and cannot exist. The various typical forms this addressivity assumes and the various concepts of the addressee are constitutive, definitive features of various speech genres’ (Bakhtin 1986: 99).

I will now, still preliminarily, summarize Bakhtin’s above constitutive features and aspects of utterances and genres, following the order in which he has presented them as problems:

– the feature of delimitation
– the feature of finalization
– the aspect of the semantic exhaustiveness of the theme
– the aspect of the speaker’s plan or speech will (that points to an ending)
– the aspect of typical compositional and generic forms of finalization
– the feature of the relation of the utterance to the speaker himself and to the other participants
– the aspect of a particular referentially semantic content
– the expressive aspect
– addressivity (a constitutive marker/feature).

We are confronted with some problems here, however. If we follow Bakhtin’s ‘notional logic’, he actually mentions four features. That the
intended number is four is less likely, however, since on page 90 Bakhtin indirectly announces that he is searching for a third element. And he terms these new elements ‘aspects’, which makes it clear that the last aspect is supposed to form a triad with the two aspects already mentioned.

A second problem is whether we will see the third feature, ‘... the relation of the utterance to the speaker himself and to the other participants ...’, as a feature at the dispositional level of the two already mentioned, or as a sub-element of the last aspect of finalization – compositional and generic forms. The latter solution would be consistent with his own phrasing of the two first aspects (they determine composition and style). However, again this does not fit with his crucial point on page 90 (announcing the third aspect). Thus, I contend that he is at this point dealing with the utterance in general, not (just) with the feature of finalization and, as we have seen, when he finally finds the (third) aspect, the terminology has now first changed to ‘marker’, and later, as already shown, to a constitutive ‘feature’ (Bakhtin 1986: 99).

I therefore suggest that from page 84 onwards Bakhtin has the utterance as such in mind, and not the features of delimitation and finalisation. This is the reason why I interpret this ‘new’ third element as positioning (= the relation of the utterance to the speaker himself and to the other participants). Another indication is simply that the element is termed ‘feature’ (even if this term seems to be used inconsistently on page 99). Further, if there are three major (inseparable) aspects at work throughout the process of uttering (constituting the phenomenon of utterance), each of these three particular aspects should be expected to be finalized as well (creating the final whole). In my view, Bakhtin has established such a consistency. For two of the pairs of aspects – the two concerning form and the two concerning content – this connection or parallel is explicit and should be obvious. The more problematic one, however, is the third, where one could nevertheless argue that it is not unlikely that intention, plan and speech intention, is in Bakhtin’s mind, closely related to, but of course not the same as, addressivity.

Hence we can rearrange the order of elements in Bakhtin’s disposition, this time following the logic of order/sequence when uttering and searching for a likely compatibility between the parts he has outlined:

– delimiting (from former utterances)
– positioning (the utterance as such by ...)
– expressing (by which expressivity becomes a constitutive aspect)
– referring a semantic content (by which referentiality becomes a constitutive aspect)
– addressing (by which addressivity becomes a constitutive aspect)
– finalising (the utterance as a whole by …)
– finalising forms (by which form as aspect contributes to wholeness)
– semantic exhausting (by which content as aspect contributes to wholeness)
– ending speech will (by which intention as aspect contributes to wholeness).

It should be underlined that the three steps, delimiting, positioning and finalizing do not form a triad. They are just sequences in a process. Expressing, referring and addressing, however, do; they are parallel, unseparable, reciprocal and simultaneous processes. In connection with the two times three aspects Bakhtin has each time explicitly dwelled on and outlined the utterance’s relationship to genre as a phenomenon. From this systematically accomplished discussion one should even be able to conclude, without having Bakhtin’s own explicit words for it, that not only is the utterance triadic, but so is genre. The important, or one may say paradigmatic, epistemological consequences of this view were never drawn by Bakhtin, though there are suggestions that a complete book on this particular topic was intended (Bakhtin 1986: xv). The negative consequences for research on Bakhtin, not dealing with his systematicity, have been quite problematic. Instead of focusing on these patterns in his thoughts, many interpreters and ‘users’ of Bakhtinian concepts have instead contributed to the fragmentation, particularization and obscurity, by stressing the more immediately accessible aspects of ‘dialogue’ rather than investigating the consequences of systemic triads as part of dialogical thinking.

Bakhtinian dialogisms as Bakhtinian ideologies

Some Marxist definitions of ideology have traditionally had an implicit aspect of conspiracy attached to them. The Bakhtin Circle, however, opposed such a normative understanding of ideology as that common among Russian Formalists during the first part of the 20th century. Rather, a Bakhtinian view assumed that there were ideologies or world views inherent in any semiotic system. Voloshinov (1973), Medvedev (1985) and Bakhtin (1986) saw ideology as a social phenomenon. When we utter something, the genre of that utterance establishes a way of perceiving the ‘world’ that is tacit in the moment of uttering (cf. Dufva, Chapter 6, this volume): ‘… we speak in diverse genres without suspecting that they exist’ (Bakhtin 1986: 78). Gunther Kress has
formulated a Bakhtinian understanding when he claims that: ‘The child learns to control the genre, but in the process the genre comes to control the child’ (Kress 1982: 11). Another theorist, Paul Ricoeur, seems close to Bakhtin: ‘… an ideology is operative and not thematic. It operates behind our backs, rather than appearing as a theme before our eyes. We think from it rather than about it’ (Ricoeur 1981: 227). A broad Bakhtinian definition of ideology can therefore be: ‘By ideology we have in mind the whole totality of reflections and refractions in the human brain of social and natural reality, as it is expressed and fixed by man in word, drawing, diagram or other form of sign’ (Voloshinov 1983: 11). For a fuller discussion of Bakhtinian thoughts on ideology, see Gardiner (1992).

Hence a particular kind of epistemology is found between the lines, in Bakhtin’s way of writing, that is, one of his basic ideologies, has to be brought to surface – the unspoken implications of dialogism. However, Bakhtin never categorised his own work as ‘dialogism’ even if the use of the term ‘dialogue’ is highly frequent in his writing. In the ‘Speech Genres’ essay, Bakhtin indeed uses dialogue as metaphor and argument for how and why the utterance is different from the sentence: ‘… drawing on material from dialogue and the rejoinders that comprise it, we must provisionally pose the problem of the sentence as a unit of language, as distinct from the utterance as a unit of speech communication’ (Bakhtin 1986: 73). That this principle is crucial, becomes clear by the way Bakhtin frames his article: The dialogical nature of the utterance is the very last topic before he begins to outline the triadic aspects of utterances and genres, and it is the topic he returns to at the very end, when summing up. The reference to dialogue functions as a point of departure, a direct introduction to the triadic part of the article: ‘The work [of an author – S.O.] is a link in the chain of speech communion. Like the rejoinder in a dialogue, it is related to other work-utterances: both those to which it responds and those that respond to it. At the same time, like the rejoinder in a dialogue, it is separated from them by the absolute boundaries created by a change of speaking subject’ (Bakhtin 1986: 76).

It is noticeable that Bakhtin speaks about dialogue here as similarity. From this comparison Bakhtin proceeds directly and explicitly to the first feature of the utterance: ‘Thus, the change of speaking subjects … is the first constitutive feature of the utterance as a unit of speech communication …’ (Bakhtin 1986: 76, emphasis added). As I pointed out earlier, finalisation is seen as a constitutive feature of the utterance and hence the implication of a possible dialogue becomes the main criterion: ‘the capability of determining the active responsive position of the other participants in the communication’ (Bakhtin 1986: 82, emphasis...
added). After this statement there is hardly any mentioning of dialogue in the article before we approach the last pages, where an important point is made: ‘The utterance is filled with dialogical overtones, and they must be taken into account in order to understand fully the style of the utterance’ (Bakhtin 1986: 92). ‘But still, even the slightest allusion to another’s utterance gives the speech a dialogical turn that cannot be produced by any purely referential theme with its own object’ (1986: 94). ‘We repeat, an utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication, and it cannot be broken off from the proceeding links that determine it both from within and from without, giving rise within it to unmediated responsive reactions and dialogic reverberations’ (1986: 94). It is at this point of the argument that Bakhtin presents his last and perhaps most crucial ‘constitutive marker’ of the utterance, namely addresivity (1986: 95).

Summing up his last argument (about the difference between the sentence and the utterance) as well as the whole article, Bakhtin in the very last paragraph concludes: ‘When one analyses an individual sentence apart from its context, the traces of addresivity and the influence of anticipated response, dialogical echoes from other’s preceding utterances, faint traces of changes of speech subjects that have furrowed the utterance from within – all these are lost, erased, because they are all foreign to the sentence as a unit of language’ (Bakhtin 1986: 99).

Thus dialogue, although present as an aspect, cannot be seen as the focus of his article, but more as a relatively loose scope. The term dialogue is, rather, used as a metaphor for the general dynamics of aspects of utterances as compared to the static, closed nature of sentences. Accordingly, what we are left with, in this particular article, is rather a loosely hinted frame where ‘dialogue’ is ‘parentheses’ around a more substantial triadic theory of utterances and genres. However, most users of Bakhtin’s text have shallowly and often uncritically embraced the sketched frame (the parenthetic ‘shells’) over-looking and the far more solid core (the ‘substance’). This superficial (non-)interpretation has contributed to a row of fundamental epistemological problems inherent in much research based on ‘Bakhtinian’ methodologies. This is not to say that dialogism is not crucial for Bakhtin’s thinking. On the contrary, triadic thinking needs careful scaffolding, not too loose, not too fixed, and dialogism may be an adequate term for this balance.

When dialogism is understood in a loose sense, it is presented in epistemological terms that come close to the conscious, playful ‘irresponsibility’ of poststructuralists. However, while poststructuralists
know that they are deliberately ‘irresponsible’, opposing and revealing structuralist approaches, many users of Bakhtinian works are not. As indicated in the introduction, dialogism as a concept tends to create or, in practice, often implicates, a double dialogical ideology. There arises a ‘closed’, dyadic, antagonistic relationship both between monologism and dialogism, where monologism is ideologically supposed to be ‘bad’ and dialogism ‘good’. The two dominating elements tend to configure what dialogue implies, a perspective that, in practice, or at the end of the day, often obscures triadic thinking. Downplaying the third, risks, ironically enough, to end in dyadic, Hegelian-like thinking of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, a philosophical approach that Bakhtin opposed.

In contrast, and perhaps as a solution, one can introduce the Hallidayan notion of the systemic, which implies a defined balance between fixation and openness both in the understanding of macro (genre/register) and micro (utterance/text) (Halliday 1978, 1994). This is actually closer both to the structure and the content of Bakhtin’s writing in this particular article than ‘dialogism’. Bakhtin related his aspects in a systemic way and the principle of dialogue can be seen as a demand for the necessity of openness, and avoiding pure essentialism. One should, however bear in mind Dop’s implicit claim that the question of the superaddressee has to be raised as a question (a problem) of essence (Dop 2000).

The triadic logic as an epistemological challenge for dialogism

The ideology of ‘dialogisms’ as interpreted theories seems to inherit several forms of blindness that many commentators, users and applicators of Bakhtin’s concept of ‘dialogue’ are not aware of. If we compare a paradoxical triadic thinking with different Bakhtinian dialogisms, the latter seem to overestimate the relation between the utterer and the (potential) interpreter/receiver focusing on responsiveness and texts in chains or on interdiscursivity, and underestimate each of the three aspects: form, content and act, as well as the crucial nature of how they interact in utterances as a triad. In a double sense this form of overestimated dialogism risks losing its validity. Not only is the constitutive dimension/aspect of content, referentiality, epistemology downsized in the accentuation of the relation between sender/receiver (or an utterance as an answer to another), but the approach as such places itself outside the question of its own validity by not addressing the question of validity in connection to dialogism. As will become clear, validity was an explicit issue for Bakhtin.
Hence the three aspects Hundeide (1999) missed. There is a striking blindness for the importance of (1) emotionality as such, (2) content as such and (3) activity as such. I have changed the order of his points for the sake of systematic comparison with Bakhtin's triadic aspects, expressivity, referentiality and addressivity respectively. Further, Dop's critique of the downplaying of content in the work of Morson and Emerson and of Holquist can be seen as a specification of the epistemological loss by avoiding addressing the issue of content (or rather the semantic aspect).

Moreover, it is symptomatic that a new Norwegian book on *Dialogue, interaction and learning*, in which Bakhtin's understanding of dialogue is something of a red thread that runs through most contributions, there is no mention of the semantic aspect of utterances and genres whatsoever (Dysthe 2001, my translation of the Norwegian title). This is especially alarming since it is a book focusing on learning and education in general. However, this is perhaps not unexpected when it is claimed in an overview of Bakhtin and socio-cultural theory that in 'Speech Genres' Bakhtin is 'primarily preoccupied with the relation between primary and secondary speech genres ...' (Igland and Dysthe 2001: 110, my translation). This is a significant example of the blindness of 'monologic dialogism'.

Another form of blindness is present in the contribution of a leading interpreter of Bakhtinian texts in Norway (Børtnes 2001). In summing up one of his sub-chapters, 'Bakhtin’s dialogical thinking', Børtnes concludes: 'All these different forms of communication are based on dialogical relations between independent utterances, independent subjects, between “I” and “you” (Børtnes 2001: 98, my translation). In the next sentence the article on the speech genres is actually mentioned, but passed over, with the argument that to deal with it would lead to a consideration of speech genres rather than dialogism, as if the two were unrelated. To clarify: the thrust of 'The Problem of Speech Genres', is genre and the dynamics with utterance, both of which are triadic (Ongstad 2002a,b).

At the end of his article, when discussing ethical responsibility, Børtnes nevertheless mentions another lost issue, namely ‘the third’, the ‘superaddressee’. Here he indirectly ‘admits’ the relevance of a third dimension, actually by quoting Bakhtin: ‘Any dialogue takes place, as it were, against a background of the invisible present “third’s” responsive understanding’ (Bakhtin 1996: 337; Børtnes 2001: 104, my translation from Norwegian). The translation to English in Bakhtin (1986), however, is slightly different, and has an important addition: ‘Each dialogue takes place as if against the background of the responsive understanding of an
invisibly present third party who stands above all the participants in the dialogue' (Bakhtin 1986: 126, emphasis added).

Hence Børtnes’s concludes: ‘with the notion of the “third” as part of the dialogue Bakhtin has reached a triadic [Norw.: “trinitær”] definition of the dialogical relation: in addition to I-for-the-other and the-other-for-me comes a “third” that relates to both the others, and which, by its invisible presence gives the dialogical word its open and infinite meaning perspective’ (Børtnes 2001: 104–5, my translation).

This third party is, in Bakhtin’s own words: ‘a constitutive aspect of the whole utterance, who, under deeper analysis, can be revealed in it’ (Bakhtin 1986: 126–7). The fundamental (epistemo-)logical consequences of moving from a mainly implicit bi-polar thinking to an explicit triadic conception is not commented upon or developed further, neither by Børtnes nor by Bakhtin. However, Bakhtin has touched upon the dilemma. According to Bakhtin, the word enters into a dialogue that does not have a semantic end, which does not mean that the utterance/word is not semantic, but rather the opposite, it is semantic in eternity, surviving temporary bi-polar oriented communicators or participants. Hence Bakhtin concludes: ‘This of course, in no way weakens the purely thematic and investigatory intentions of the word, its concentration on its own object. Both aspects are two sides of the same coin; they are inseparably linked. They can be separated only in a word that is known to be false, that is, in one that wishes to deceive (the separation between the referential intention and the intention to be heard and understood). The word that fears the third party and seeks only temporary recognition (responsive understanding of limited depth) from immediate addressees’ (Bakhtin 1986: 127). (This verb-free utterance (or sentence? sic!) is not an incorrect quote, but a result of Bakhtin’s use of the genre ‘notes’.)

What about Bakhtin’s own epistemology, the core focus of my article? Are there indicators of the direction in which he could have moved? There are a few, relatively clear hints echoing Kant’s triads in Bakhtin’s past, Karl Bühler’s triads in Bakhtin’s present and anticipating Jürgen Habermas’s triads in Bakhtin’s future: ‘Only an utterance has a direct relationship to the reality and to the living, speaking person (subject) … . Only an utterance can be faithful (or unfaithful), sincere, true (false), beautiful, just and so forth’ (Bakhtin 1986: 122; cf. Bühler 1934; Habermas 1984). This argument leads to the question of ‘The utterance as a semantic whole’, a key paragraph in the article The problem of the text:

The relationship to others’ utterances cannot be separated from the relationship to the object (for it is argued about, agreed upon, views
converge within it), nor can it be separated from the relationship to the speaker himself. *This is a living tripartite unity*. But the third element is still not usually taken into account. And when it has been taken into account (in analysis of the literary process, the works of journalists, in polemics, in the struggle among scientific opinions), the special nature of relations toward other utterances as utterances, that is, toward semantic wholes, has remained undisclosed and unstudied (these relations have been understood abstractly, thematically and logically, or psychologically, or even mechanically and causally). The special dialogical nature of interrelations of semantic wholes, semantic positions, that is, utterances, has not been understood.

(Bakhtin 1986: 123)

The ‘living tripartite unity’ provides a key to the question of validity and ‘the essence of the utterance as a semantic whole’: ‘Every utterance makes a claim to justice, sincerity, beauty, and truthfulness (a model utterance), and so forth. And these values of utterances are defined not by their relation to language (as a purely linguistic system), but to various forms of relation to reality, to the speaking subject and to other (alien) utterances (particularly to those that evaluate them as sincere, beautiful, and so forth)’ (Bakhtin 1986: 123).

In other words, in these late writings Bakhtin returns to his Neo-Kantian project of finding the means of the balancing of the main aspects of philosophy. Børtnes (2001) holds that while Bakhtin still lived in Vitebsk (in the 1920s), he was intensively working on the relationship between aesthetics, ethics and cognition, a work that today is known as ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’ (Børtnes 2001: 94–5). A rather similar claim is put forward by Bocharov (1993): ‘Bakhtin develops a critique of “fatal theoreticism” in the philosophy of that time (in epistemology, in ethics and in aesthetics, and opposes to it, as a task to be accomplished, the “answerable unity” of thinking and performed action …’ (Bakhtin/Bocharev 1993: xxiii, translated introduction to the Russian edition).

We also have Bakhtin’s own comments suggesting triadic elements should be considered. Even if the following quote is contextually/originally related to his writing about the act and its ethics, one can sense the search for a larger, embracing coherence. In this (re-)search there are more triads than dialogues: ‘There is no aesthetic ought, scientific ought, and – beside them – an ethical ought; there is only that which is aesthetically, theoretically, socially valid, and these validities may
be joined by the ought, for which all of them are instrumental. These positings gain their validity within an aesthetic, a scientific or a sociological unity: the ought gains its validity within the unity of my once-current answerable life’ (Bakhtin 1993: 5, my emphasis).

A strikingly similar triadic conclusion is drawn by Anders Bordum in his Ethics of discourse, a book which is committed to Habermas’ triadic understanding of communicative action (Bordum 2001, my translation of the title from Danish). The point of connecting these seemingly independent views is that they have no common references. Thus it is tempting to argue that the validity of a triadic view increases, given the fact that the two approaches coincide, seemingly developed quite separately. The same holds for the work of Michael Halliday and his followers, all seeing both text and context (genre/register) as triadic (see attached overview of related triads).

However, there may still be, as I have already hinted at, a possible undiscovered cultural link between Bakhtin, Bordum/Habermas and Halliday through philosophy (Aristotle and Kant). That Bakhtin knew Kant’s work is clear, but did he know about Bühler, when there are no clear signs of that or specific references in Bakhtin’s article? It has now been revealed by Craig Brandist, not only that the Bakhtin Circle quite early (in the 1920s) had access to versions of Bühler’s so-called ‘organon model’ (Bühler 1934), but that Voloshinov even translated an article of Bühler on syntax into Russian in the mid-1920s (Brandist 2002: 63). Hence he is able to claim that it is ‘… Bühler’s account of the utterance which plays a central role in shaping the Bakhtinian account of discursive action’ (Brandist 2002: 64; see also Brandist, Chapter 1, this volume).

Conclusions and endings

‘The Problem of Speech Genres’ is a central work for researchers who wish to apply Bakhtin’s work. Dop has raised the question, but has not seen the path that Bakhtin has suggested. The most enthusiastic dialogists, especially the many who have overlooked Bakhtin’s triadic ‘alternative’, should consider making dialogism, not an overarching principle, but a dynamic aspect of triadic thinking. This would imply a relational positioning that will not reduce Bakhtin’s epistemology to a world-view in which ‘no truth is possible, because it contains only the discourse of various interlocutors, a world in which all options are equally valid’, namely epistemological relativism, a warning that originally was put forward by Todorov and has been adequately repeated by Dop (2000: 8).
The paradox that arises when one brings together dyadic and triadic thinking, for instance trying to make Saussurean and Hallidayian grammar compatible, is confusing to many. Bakhtin’s idea that the dialogues are neverending chains of communication on the one hand and his idea that utterances and genres in this process are triadic on the other, should not necessarily be seen as an inconsistency, but rather as a genuine Bakhtinian openness, irrespective of the fact that Bakhtin himself never addressed the logic of this dilemma/trilemma explicitly. The key to understanding the (im-)balances is the thought-provoking principle of simultaneity (Habermas 1995) of expressivity, referentiality and adrettivity in utterances, and accordingly aesthetics, epistemology and ethics as reciprocal (Ongstad 2002a,b). Hence dialogism could be seen as dynamics between the aspects and their endless sub-variations on the one hand and dynamics between the triadic utterance and the triadic genre on the other.

There are some few interpreters who have unsystematically registered Bakhtin’s triadic orientation. The triadic point of departure is, for instance, underlined by Valerii Tiupa, in the following way: ‘Bakhtin’s model of the utterance includes three components, three aspects of the communicative event: the subject (S), the object (O) (the “objective referentially semantic aspect” of the utterance, which in its intentionality is determined by the subject), and the addressee (A)’ (Tiupa 1998: 97).

Tiupa goes on to combine these three components in a classical triangle, to make sure that the aspects are to be interpreted as interrelative and simultaneous. He is critical of the tendency among deconstructionists to embrace Bakhtin’s openendedness. He finds this aspect incompatible with Derrida’s approach: ‘The strategy of deconstruction is the death of Bakhtin’s tri-aspectual word’ (Tiupa 1998: 101). This argument could even be turned and fortified by claiming that a double triadic view of utterance/genre represents the epistemological death of bi-polar, loose (de-)constructions (Ongstad 1995, 1997). Tiupa further argues that Bakhtin’s insistence on the three aspects both being inseparable and not merging into one, establishes an architectonics of discourse that in its architectonical threefoldness is of great significance for the human spirit and its most cultural forms (Tiupa 1998: 104). Finally, in one of Tiupa’s endnotes he underlines that the ‘… primary link of ethical (religious) discourse is the addressee, not the subject, as in aesthetic (artistic) discourse, and not the object, as in epistemological discourse’ (Tiupa 1998: 106n).

This last, quite simple statement can function as the establishment of a common ground for the work of Kant, Bühler, Bakhtin, Habermas and
Halliday (Ongstad 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999a,b) although these scholars in many respects differ significantly. What brings aesthetics, epistemology and ethics together, though, is the triadic and dynamic elements of utterance and genre, the expressivity of syntactic form and text, the referentiality of the semantic content and the addressivity of the pragmatic act (Ongstad 2002a,b). This understanding will be a provocation to poststructuralist deconstruction, simplistic dialogism, and structural essentialism (among others). The paradox of the semiotic triad is not the answer, but the new, adequate question: How can something be one, two and three, at once? (Ongstad 1995). (The question of the hermeneutic circle.)

Finally, confronted with the triadic claim a quite common reaction is: Why does it have to be three, why not two or four or five? If we follow Bakhtin’s way of thinking, the answer is simple: by leaving a linguistic, dyadic Saussurean (signifier/signified) understanding of language in favour of communication, three is the smallest number of components that is necessary for establishing (a definition of) communication (Ongstad 2004). And Bakhtin’s insistence is that addressivity is the necessary third, which in a sense makes him an early pragmatist (Andersen 2002). However like Habermas and (partly) Halliday, Bakhtin refuses to give any of the main aspects absolute primacy. Primacy should be related to the use of the triadic idea, Habermas for instance being interested in action and hence ethics, and Halliday interested in a non-Saussurean grammar and hence function. This will toward relative openness becomes clear when we consider Bakhtin’s lifelong, unfinalized search for expressivity, referentiality and addressivity or aesthetics, epistemology and ethics not only as living tripartite unities, but even as keys to the challenge of validating “beauty,” “truth,” and “goodness.” Bakhtin is dead, but his semantics survives, a content still searching a triadic dialogue.
Appendix

Overview of triads as consequence of foci on major fields of interest

Communicational triads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utterance, genre, language as ...</th>
<th>form</th>
<th>content</th>
<th>use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Utterance, genre, language as ...</td>
<td>structure</td>
<td>reference</td>
<td>act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>structuring</td>
<td>referring</td>
<td>acting/addressing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process as focused characteristics</td>
<td>expressivity</td>
<td>referentiality</td>
<td>addressivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fields of language and semiotics</td>
<td>syntax</td>
<td>semantics</td>
<td>pragmatics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatically metaphorised as</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seen as pronoun</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>it</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts of the body</td>
<td>self</td>
<td>world</td>
<td>society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain of reality (Habermas)</td>
<td>inner</td>
<td>outer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halliday's language contexts</td>
<td>nature</td>
<td>nature</td>
<td>society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts of semiotic space</td>
<td>mode</td>
<td>field</td>
<td>tenor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Triads used by some theorists

Bühler (1934) the language sign
Language sign (in German) (Ausdruck) (Darstellung) (Appell)
Aspect, focused by receiver symptom symbol signal
Halliday (1978) metafunctions/language context/register
Bakhtin (1986) constituents of utterances
aspects of utterance expressivity referentiality addressivity
forms generic semantic speech plan (?)
the speaker theme the other's utterances
the object
aspects of culture aesthetic scientific ethical
aspects of validities aesthetically theoretically socially

Habermas (1984)
Aspect of lifeworld inner nature outer nature society
Form of appearance subjectivity objectivity normativity
for reality relations
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech acts</th>
<th>expressive</th>
<th>propositional</th>
<th>illocutionary</th>
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<td>General functions</td>
<td>experiences</td>
<td>matters</td>
<td>relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>expressive</td>
<td>cognitive</td>
<td>interactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech act</td>
<td>representative</td>
<td>constative</td>
<td>regulative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>utterer's intention</td>
<td>propositional</td>
<td>interpersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity claim</td>
<td>truthfullness/ veracity</td>
<td>content</td>
<td>relation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Components of the lifeworld</td>
<td>personality</td>
<td>culture</td>
<td>society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reproduction processes</td>
<td>socialisation</td>
<td>cultural</td>
<td>social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative action</td>
<td>sociation</td>
<td>reproduction</td>
<td>integration</td>
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**Hernadi (1995)**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Major elements</th>
<th>self</th>
<th>nature</th>
<th>society</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Other major elements</td>
<td>existence</td>
<td>culture</td>
<td>experience</td>
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<td>Rhetorical aims</td>
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<td>teaching</td>
<td>moving</td>
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<td>Discourse involve</td>
<td>individual</td>
<td>natural</td>
<td>social activity</td>
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<td>Psychological capacities</td>
<td>identity</td>
<td>facticity</td>
<td>activity</td>
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<td>Evaluative criteria</td>
<td>feeling</td>
<td>knowing</td>
<td>willing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>beauty</td>
<td>truth</td>
<td>justice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Traditional**

| ‘Traditional’ concepts | emotional | cognitive | social |
| ‘Traditional’ concepts | existential | informative | addressive |
| Fields by evaluation of outcomes | beauty | truth | goodness |
| Evaluations | aesthetics | epistemology | ethics |
| (ranging from) ugly-nice | false-true | wrong-right | |
| Societal domains | art | science | politics |
| Outcome from the domains | artwork | research | decision/regulation |
| Traditional triads | feelings | thought | will |
| Alliterations | heart | head | hand |
|                     | beauty | brain | brawn |
|                     | identity | idea | interrelation |

**Aspects positioned as..**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State of the body</th>
<th>being</th>
<th>thinking</th>
<th>doing</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(as a noun)</td>
<td>(as a noun)</td>
<td>(as a noun)</td>
<td>(as a noun)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodily processes</td>
<td>being</td>
<td>thinking</td>
<td>doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(as a verb)</td>
<td>(as a verb)</td>
<td>(as a verb)</td>
<td>(as a verb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect in/of the sign process</td>
<td>impulse</td>
<td>category</td>
<td>process</td>
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</table>
Positioning(s) of professional fields, approaches, and isms when dominant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of language/semiotics</th>
<th>syntax</th>
<th>semantics</th>
<th>pragmatics</th>
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<tr>
<td>General approaches/disciplines</td>
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<td>epistemology</td>
<td>ethics</td>
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<tr>
<td>(typical example)</td>
<td>psychology</td>
<td>science</td>
<td>sociology</td>
</tr>
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<td>Different neg. characterisations</td>
<td>subjectivism</td>
<td>objectivism</td>
<td>activism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Different neg. characterisations</td>
<td>expressivism</td>
<td>positivism</td>
<td>functionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different neg. characterisations</td>
<td>formalism</td>
<td>essensialism</td>
<td>pragmatism</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Part II
The Theory of Language
Between Relativism and Absolutism: Towards an Emergentist Definition of Meaning Potential

Mika Lähteenmäki

Introduction

The dialogical ‘meaning as a potential’ approach can be seen as a critique of those mainstream theories of semantics and pragmatics which take for granted the idea that a linguistic expression has an invariant linguistic meaning or a semantic representation independent of actual situated language use.¹ In dialogism, this view is rejected and a linguistic expression is considered as a relatively open meaning potential, that is, a multiplicity of possible meanings. Thus, a linguistic expression represents a meaning resource which attains a fixed and specific meaning only as a result of dialogical interaction between speaker and listener in a certain social context. It is noteworthy that, within a dialogical approach to language, there are slightly different views concerning the applicability of the notion of meaning potential. For instance, Per Linell (1998: 118) sees it first and foremost as an alternative model of lexical semantics, whereas R. Rommetveit’s (1988) ‘linguistic expressions’ seem to include both words and sentences.

The idea of ‘meaning as a potential’ plays a significant role in the linguistic considerations of Bakhtin (1986) and Voloshinov (1973), although, in the context of language studies, the notion of meaning potential is most frequently associated with the work of Rommetveit (1988, 1990, 1992), who – before becoming familiar with Bakhtin’s and Voloshinov’s writings – had developed rather similar views which were inspired mainly by Wittgenstein’s later philosophy and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. The idea of meaning as a potentiality was also discussed within Prague semiotics, for instance, by Kartsevskii (2000) and
Mukařovsky (1978), whose conception of language can also be characterized as dialogical. However, the idea of ‘meaning as a potential’ is by no means limited to dialogism or to a dialogical approach to language only. As Marková (1992: 51–2) points out, the idea of meaning as a potentiality has a long history in Central European linguistic thought and can be traced back to Wilhelm von Humboldt. Within neo-Humboldtianism meaning as a potentiality is discussed, for instance, by Theodor Lipps (see Mohanty 1976: 72). As regards the Russian tradition, similar ideas were expressed, for instance, by G. Shpet (1990) and A. F. Losev (1993) during the 1920s and 1930s. In the contemporary context of linguistics, the notion of meaning potential is also employed by M. A. K. Halliday who, however, gives it a much broader definition. According to Halliday (1978: 9), meaning potential is either ‘the entire system of the language’ (context of culture) or ‘the particular semantic system, or set of subsystems’ (context of situation).

As the dialogical notion of meaning potential differs radically from the notion of literal meaning, it goes without saying that from the traditional, monologic point of view the notion of meaning potential may seem theoretically awkward. If meanings are not absolute, invariant and identical for all the speakers, it may seem that there is no way to make sense of the world around us. The indeterminacy of meanings seems to lead to a situation in which there are as many possible meanings as there are situations. In other words, if one is not ready to accept the notion of literal meaning according to which there are absolute context-independent meanings at the level of language system, it may seem that the only alternative is to commit oneself to a relativistic ‘anything goes’ stance according to which any expression can mean anything. This criticism, however, can be seen as misguided, since the basic assumption shared by Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Rommetveit is that the meaning potential of a linguistic expression is inherently social in its nature.

The chief aim of this paper is to discuss the dialogical notion of meaning and to argue against the view that the notion of meaning potential automatically implies a commitment to an individualistic and relativistic theory of meaning. It is argued that the social nature of meaning potentials can be explicated by recontextualizing the dialogical approach to language and communication and considering it from the viewpoint of ‘use-theory of meaning’ developed by Wittgenstein in his Philosophical Investigations. The basic assumption is that meaning potentials are rooted in social practices of a given community and can be understood as properties that emerge from social activity. The main point is that, when interpreted within the framework of a ‘use-theory
of meaning’, the dialogical notion of meaning potential can be given a
definition which frees it from accusations of being relativistic, while, at
the same time remaining, anti-essentialist and indeterministic in nature.
To be more precise, meaning potentials are seen as being emergent3 by
nature, which means they can be conceived of as rules which, on the
one hand, function as resources for social and cultural practices and, on
the other hand, are (re)created via the actual rule-following behaviour.

Some objections to the notion of literal meaning

The idea that there exist invariant literal meanings is taken for granted
in many mainstream theories of meaning. Perhaps the most common
criterion that is used in order to distinguish literal meanings of linguis-
tic expressions from various nonliteral meanings is the alleged context
independence of literal meanings (for discussion, see Kovala 1999).
Literal meanings are seen as context-free in the sense that they are
assumed to remain unchanged when a linguistic expression is used on
different occasions. In other words, the standard interpretation of the
notion of literal meaning assumes that every linguistic expression has a
context-free literal meaning which can be accounted for in purely lin-
guistic terms with no reference whatsoever to actual language use.4 This
position is made explicit, for instance, by Katz (1981: 203) who argues
that literal sentence meaning is ‘a compositional function of the mean-
ings of component words and syntactic structure’. In Katz’s account, the
notion of literal meaning is inseparably connected to the idea of com-
positionality, which means that the literal meaning of a sentence
amounts to, or is composed of, the meanings of linguistic units and the
syntactic relations between them. A somewhat different version of the
notion of literal meaning is discussed by Searle (1981: 117) who sees lit-
eral meanings as context-sensitive in the sense that ‘the notion of the
literal meaning of a sentence only has application relative to a set of
contextual or background assumptions’. In Searle’s (1981: 130) view, the
literal meaning is not a sufficient condition for the determination of
utterance meanings in all contexts, but the literal meaning of a sentence
only determines different truth conditions relative to different sets of
background assumptions. Searle thus seems to think that literal sen-
tence meaning is based on its truth conditions, but these truth condi-
tions cannot be determined without a reference to certain background
assumptions which are not specified as a part of the semantic content of
the sentence. Nevertheless, although Searle makes it explicit that there
are no autonomous literal sentence meanings which could be determined
independently of language use, he also seems to share Katz’s view according to which literal sentence meanings function as an invariant base from which different ‘nonliteral’ meanings such as metaphorical and ironical meanings are inferred. Thus, the basic assumption that underlies both Searle’s and Katz’s views is that at the level of language system there are fundamental literal meanings which are considered as ‘absolute’ and ‘basic’ meanings, whereas contextual meanings are seen as derivative from literal meanings.

The notion of literal meaning is problematic in that the concept of literalness seems to imply that literal meanings must be invariant, stable, fixed and definite whether independently of contexts (Katz) or relative to a specific context (Searle). However, if one tries to define the literal meaning of an ordinary word, say cup, not to mention more abstract words such as democracy or love, one is faced with the fact that actual meanings that are manifested in different contexts do not have clear-cut boundaries, but are more or less vague and flexible. Thus, when we try to approach the problem of meaning from the viewpoint of actual verbal interaction between two or more social agents, instead of invariant literal meanings we will find a multiplicity of variant contextual meanings of utterances which are necessarily unique. In other words, a linguistic expression when used in an actual social context can never have a meaning that would be identical to its previous and subsequent uses, because contexts can never be exactly identical. The problem is, then, how it is possible, when confronted with multiplicity of unique contextual meanings, to decide which occasion would be the best or most prototypical representative to be chosen as the literal meaning of the linguistic expression in question. Another strategy would be to think of literal meaning as something that could be called a semantic nucleus, that is, a bundle of features shared by all uses of an expression. The problem with this solution is that it requires different uses to share at least one common semantic feature in order to be classified as instances of one and the same linguistic expression. It thus seems to exclude all those cases in which the unity of different uses is not based on the existence of a common denominator, but on family resemblance. The third alternative, as Allwood (1981: 183) points out, is the union or vagueness approach, according to which the literal meaning is the sum of all contextual uses of that expression which means that it can be regarded as a variant of ‘use-theory of meaning’. The problem with this third alternative is that by identifying the meaning of an expression with its actual uses it represents an overpragmatic interpretation of use-theory of meaning which makes it impossible to distinguish between actual and normative aspects of linguistic behaviour.
Thus, it appears that all these definitions of the notion of literal meaning have several drawbacks. Within the dialogical framework the notion of literal meanings has been thoroughly criticized, for instance, by Rommetveit (1988, 1992) and Linell (1988, 1998). According to Rommetveit (1988: 14–15), linguistic meanings are embedded in social interaction and are thus intersubjectively defined, which implies that they are dependent on certain features characteristic of human action, such as perspectivity, dependency on shared background conditions etc. What is important in the dialogical approach, is that signs – which by themselves are part of reality – are connected to reality not in some non-perspectival manner or from an absolute God’s-eye perspective, but only through intersubjective action. In other words, the connection between language and reality is not based on a fixed pictorial relationship, but is established only when language is used in order to pick out some specific aspect of reality. As the use of language is bound to certain spatio-temporal coordinates, it also means that actual acts of meaning-giving are necessarily connected to a certain unique point of view. In this respect, the notion of literal meaning cannot be regarded as an adequate tool for analysing meanings, as it clearly fails to capture the perspectivity and situatedness which, in the dialogical view, are to be seen as inherent features of actual meaning-giving.

Meaning as a potential

In dialogism, multiplicity, flexibility, vagueness and negotiability of meanings are seen as inherent properties and constitutive features of natural languages (Voloshinov 1973: 101; Rommetveit 1984: 335). In this respect, dialogism radically differs from various code-theoretic accounts of meaning in which vagueness and variation of meanings are considered as purely accidental features that are not properties of language system, but stem from language use. Contrary to the code-theoretic view, in dialogism the meaningfulness of linguistic expressions is not based on a fixed pregiven one-to-one relationship between form and meaning. The meaning of a linguistic expression arises from its use, and as language can be used for various purposes in social practices of a community, it is difficult to see how a linguistic expression could have one basic literal meaning that would characterize its every use. Hence, in the dialogical philosophy of language it is assumed that there are no fixed and precise meanings at the level of language system, whereas the ‘linguistic’ meaning of an expression is seen as a relatively open meaning potential. According to Voloshinov (1973: 101), linguistic units do
not mean anything as such, but only possess a possibility of having a
meaning when used in a particular social context. In this view, a lin-
guistic expression attains a specific meaning only as a result of a nego-
tiation between a speaker and a listener that has been characterized by
Rommetveit (1992: 23) as ‘attunement to the attunement of the other’.
To sum up, linguistic expressions do not have pregiven, invariant mean-
ings, but can best be characterized as relatively open meaning resources
which have sedimented and crystallized in social practices of a given
community and that attain a specific meaning only when used in inter-
subjective action in which the interlocutors try to adapt to each other’s
unique perspectives.

The fact that dialogism abandons the notion of literal meaning may
seem to be a theoretically awkward and counter-intuitive solution. One
reason for this is that the notion of literal meaning is so pervasive in
both our naive and expert views on language. Rommetveit (1988: 13)
argues that the ‘myth of literal meaning’ can be seen as a specific fea-
ture of Western literate cultures and linguistic tradition. Linell (1982),
who has discussed the ‘written language bias’ of linguistics in detail,
seems to subscribe to the same view. The idea that the notion of literal
meaning would be a characteristic feature of literate cultures only is,
however, challenged by Itkonen (1991) who argues that the idea of lit-
eral meaning can be found in different cultures irrespective of whether
they are literal or not. For instance, Itkonen (1991: 12) shows that
Panini’s grammar involves the notion of literal meaning, although it
was a description of spoken language and existed as memorised and was
orally transmitted before it was written down. Thus, it seems that irre-
spective of whether the language form under investigation is spoken or
written, the reflection upon language necessarily involves abstraction
from situated use and decontextualization of meanings. The notion of
literal meaning, in turn, can be seen as a product of these decontextu-
alizing practices (see Linell 1992) typical to both oral and written cul-
tures. Also Wittgenstein argues that we are often trapped in the
customary ways of looking at language provided by our culture.
According to Wittgenstein (1964: 25–26), ‘we talk of language as a sym-
bolism used in exact calculus’ although the ‘ordinary use of language
conforms to this standard of exactness in rare cases’. … And the philo-
sophical ‘puzzles which we try to remove always spring from just this
attitude towards language’. Against this background, it is easy to under-
stand that giving up the notion of literal meaning may seem to threaten
our common-sense ideas of how the words of a language are connected
to the world, how it is possible to refer to objects and states of affairs in
the world by using words and sentences, how it is possible for people to communicate with each other and so on.

Perhaps the most common argument against the idea that there are no literal meanings with clear-cut boundaries is that giving up the notion of literal meaning necessarily commits oneself to a relativistic theory of meaning. Furthermore, in addition to our common-sense views of meaning, a dialogical account also seems to challenge a certain ontological and epistemological stance which is intimately connected with the notion of literal meaning. This ontological and epistemological view, which has been called metaphysical realism by Putnam (1981) and the objectivist paradigm by Lakoff (1987: 160), basically amounts to the idea that reality consists of entities with certain fixed properties and fixed relations that hold between them. The objectivist view of cognition and knowledge, in turn, is based on the notion of representation which means that the conceptual and linguistic categories are supposed to correspond to objects and states of affairs in reality. In other words, human cognition and natural languages are seen as ‘mirrors of nature’ (Rorty 1979; Lakoff 1987: 162) which are supposed to reflect the way in which reality is structured. Thus, it can be argued that the idea that words and sentences necessarily have an invariant literal meaning is intimately connected to the background assumptions that concern ontological aspects of language and reality. According to Lakoff (1987: 167), the basic assumption of what he calls the objectivist account of meaning is that linguistic expressions are meaningful only by virtue of their capacity to be true or false descriptions of objects or states of affairs of reality. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere (Lähteenmäki 1998a: 89), the notion of literal meaning is intimately connected with the idea that, first, reality has a pregiven fixed structure, second, there is some ultimate way of making correct mental representations of the structure of reality, and third, there is a fixed correspondence between the objects of reality and the linguistic expressions which are used to refer either to the objects of reality or to their mental representations.

The notion of meaning potential may also seem dubious because it appears to undermine the conceptual distinction between ‘social’ and ‘individual’ which plays a crucial role in those approaches in which language is regarded as a social phenomenon. By this I mean that the literalness of meanings is seen as a necessary result of the fact that language is inherently social, and therefore, it is thought that it is impossible to think of language as a social system of signs without the notion of literal meaning. According to this view, the distinction between ‘social’ and ‘individual’ is seen as a binary opposition, that is, they are regarded as
mutually exclusive notions as a consequence of which phenomena are to be classified as either social or individual. This idea can be found, for instance, in Saussure's (1990) *Course* in which he argues that the distinction between ‘langue’ and ‘parole’ is based on the distinction between what is ‘social’ and what is ‘individual’. Furthermore, the conceptual distinction between ‘social’ and ‘individual’ is also closely connected to the concepts of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ in the sense that ‘social’ is equated with ‘objective’ whereas ‘individual’ is seen as standing for ‘subjective’. Then, if language is seen as a social phenomenon or a social fact, it seems to be natural – in the light of the above mentioned distinctions – to assume that at the level of social language system every linguistic expression must have an objective literal meaning. And in the opposite situation, if there are not any objective literal meanings at the level of language system, it follows that language cannot be regarded as a social fact, since being subjective, meanings belong to the realm of ‘individual’.

In brief, according to this view the social nature of language implies that linguistic expressions must have objective literal meanings, because otherwise meanings would be subjective, which necessarily leads to individualism and relativism.

From the dialogical point of view the line of thought according to which meanings are either objective and literal or subjective and relative is to be regarded as fundamentally mistaken. The fact that meaning potentials are seen as relatively open and dynamic by no means leads to individualism or to a relativistic theory of meaning. As Voloshinov (1973: 100) points out, a contextual meaning ‘must base itself on some kind of fixity of meaning; otherwise it loses its connection with what came before and what comes after – that is, it altogether loses its significance’. Voloshinov here makes two points which are important for the present discussion. First, when a speaker wants to communicate something he cannot use linguistic expressions in some random and arbitrary manner, but instead his/her possibilities to use an expression in a particular context are limited and dependent on the antecedent use of that expression by other members of the community. Second, although every use of an expression carries with itself the word’s memory, the use of an expression in a particular context is also directed to the future in the sense that every use of an expression effects its potential to mean in forthcoming contexts. Thus, as a consequence of the fact that actual uses are embedded in the continuous flow of social meaning-giving, meaning potentials are not only relatively open, but also in an essential sense relatively stable in their nature. The relative stability of meanings or ‘some kind of fixity’, as Voloshinov puts it, does not, however, mean
that we should postulate a set of invariant semantic features or primitives into which all actual meanings could be reduced. In the dialogical context ‘fixity’ is understood as referring to conventionality and normativity characteristic to any form of social interaction.

**Dialogism and emergentism**

In the dialogical approach, factual uses and actual meanings that manifest themselves in time and space are regarded as primary to the rules that are supposed to underlie these uses. This position is made explicit by Voloshinov (1973: 94) who argues in his criticism of Saussurean ‘abstract objectivism’ that for an account to be really objective, it has to take it for granted that ‘verbal interaction is the basic reality of language’. Nevertheless, although actual verbal interaction is given the primacy over abstract rules, it does not follow that language would be conceived of as ‘pure actuality’. On the contrary, in the dialogical view language is also essentially a potential or resource which can be seen as constitutive relative to the meaningfulness of actual interaction. From this it follows that although meanings are seen as intimately connected to language use, it does not mean that one automatically commits oneself to an over-pragmatic interpretation of the ‘use-theory of meaning’ according to which the meaning of a linguistic expression is simply identified with the actual meanings that are manifested in particular contexts. The dialogical approach, which denies the existence of invariant literal meanings, does not assume that meanings only have unique and context-dependent aspects. On the contrary, meanings have both stable and dynamic aspects and the interrelationship of these two aspects, it is argued, is something that can be conceived of as emergent in nature.

The notion of emergence has become a popular topic among philosophers and representatives of other fields of science. Nevertheless, there exists no single definition of emergence that would be commonly accepted, rather, there are several competing and radically different views on how the notion of emergence should be understood (for a review of different definitions, see Pihlström 1999). One of the controversial issues is the question of the ontological status of emergence. On the one hand, there are views according to which emergence is an ontological category, that is, emergence is understood as a property of reality, as something which really exists ‘out there’ (see for example Bunge 1981). On the other hand, there are also views according to which emergence should be regarded as a purely theory-relative or epistemic notion (see for example Nagel 1961). A more promising alternative is proposed
by Pihlström (1999) who questions the dichotomy between ontology and epistemology and, in the spirit of pragmatism, argues that emergence should be understood as both an ontological and an epistemological concept. In Pihlström’s (1999: 192) view it is impossible to categorically distinguish between ontological and epistemological aspects of emergence, for ‘there is no humanly possible point of view for ontologizing about the way the world is structured in itself, entirely independently of our epistemic standpoints’. In other words, for Pihlström, ontologizing is to be seen as situated practice, and emergence can be regarded as ontologically real, because it is an essential feature of those social and cultural practices by which we try to make sense of the world around us. Here, the notion of emergence is understood as both an ontologically and epistemologically real concept, and it is used, in its ontological sense, to refer to the rise of such properties that cannot be predicted from their constituent parts and antecedent conditions. Thus, a property can be classified as emergent if it cannot be reduced into some lower-level phenomena, although the lower-level phenomena are constitutive in relation to the emergent property. In this respect, when we say that actual meanings are emergent from meaning potentials, we mean that actual meanings that arise – or are jointly created – in the interaction between social agents are necessarily novel and unique and, therefore, cannot be reduced to meaning potentials, although meaning potentials are constitutive of actual meanings.

The basic assumption of emergentism is that reality has properties which cannot be explained away by referring to the constitutive elements of those properties and to relations that hold between them. In this respect, it bears a close resemblance to dialogism which can also be characterized an essentially antireductionist approach. One of the fundamental ideas in Bakhtin’s thought is that human existence and human acts are first and foremost characterized by their ‘eventness’ which can be understood as referring to their situatedness and perspectivity, and hence, uniqueness and irreducibility. As verbal acts can be considered as a special case of human acts, it follows that specific meanings that actualize themselves in particular contexts are necessarily unique, as verbal acts, as all human acts are characterized by their unique spatio-temporal co-ordinates. In the dialogical view, it is assumed that a necessary precondition for contextual meanings to arise is that speaker and listener are mutually committed into intersubjective action as a result of which speaker and listener jointly create something essentially new and unique. In this respect, it can be argued that the relationship between actual meanings and meaning potentials can be
best characterized as emergent in its nature, which means that actual meanings utilize meaning potentials of language, but meaning potentials cannot specify actual meanings which are essentially novel relative to meaning potentials. In other words, meaning potentials can be regarded as constitutive to actual meanings which manifest themselves in particular contexts, but as a result of their inherent ‘eventness’ contextual meanings cannot be reduced to meaning potentials. Meaning potentials thus are necessary, but not sufficient in order to determine the contextual meaning of a linguistic expression.

**Wittgenstein and ‘going on in the same way’**

The concept of meaning developed by the later Wittgenstein (1953) is intimately connected to such notions as ‘use’, ‘practice’ and ‘custom’ and, for him, the ability of expressions of a natural language to mean something is based on the existence of social conventions that regulate the use of expressions and also on the existence of factual spatio-temporal events in which agents make use of social conventions to achieve certain goals. Wittgenstein speaks of language as practice, normative action and learned skill which shows that for him language is a multifaceted phenomenon that defies any clear-cut definition. The same is true of the notion of rule. The Wittgensteinian concept of rule is extremely difficult to nail down, since it clearly is a family-resemblance concept (Baker and Hacker 1985: 43), that is, a concept that cannot be given a Merkmal-definition based on the common features shared by all uses of ‘rule’. For the present purposes, it is important to pay attention to one specific aspect of Wittgenstein’s rule considerations, namely the criticism he addresses towards the common view according to which rules are seen as external to rule-following behaviour. In this view, rules are supposed to exist independently of social practices of community either in a Platonist world of ideas or in the mind of an individual in the form of hidden rules waiting to be discovered by a linguist (see Baker and Hacker 1984: 58). Wittgenstein argues that this view of rules as existing in some separate realm – either ‘social’ or ‘individual’ – and from there determining the behaviour of individuals must be regarded as profoundly mistaken.

In Wittgenstein’s view, the existence of rules is dependent on the existence of normative activity and practices, and therefore, rules can be characterized as ‘procedures of action, aspects of praxis’ (Giddens 1984: 21). Rules can be seen as inherently practical in their nature in the sense that knowing a rule means possessing a skill to act in a correct way in
certain kinds of social situations or ‘mastering a technique’ which enables one to ‘go on in the same way’. In this respect, Wittgenstein’s remarks on rules can be read as a more general attack on our customary ways of thinking of social rules and structures in terms of reified objects which would exist independently of social action that manifests itself in time and space. We are often tempted to think that rules must have an object-like existence, and this easily leads to the confusion of rules with rule-formulations (see also Baker and Hacker 1985: 41) that are merely interpretations and explications of this or that skill. It should be emphasized that rules do not have a linguistic, propositional or any symbolic form whatsoever, only rule-formulations do. In this respect, Wittgenstein can be seen as a spokesman for an anti-assentialist view of rule, as for him rules are not formula-like abstract objects that would exist in their own right independently of social action, but rather are seen as highly routinized learned skills to act in a correct and meaningful way in various social contexts.

The famous Wittgensteinian slogan ‘meaning is use’ is taken to imply that the meaning of an expression arises from actual events of usage. However, to say that the meaning potential of a linguistic expression is based on its previous uses is not to say that the meaning of an expression is determined by its past uses. To make this point clear, it is useful to distinguish between language learning, on the one hand, and ‘mastering a technique’ on the other. When learning a language, a child basically learns what s/he can do with words by observing how members of community act verbally in different situations. In other words, s/he learns normatively correct patterns of conventionalised situated action and certain conventional ways to act verbally in certain kinds of situations. In addition to this, parents and other members of community also make metalinguistic comments in order to explicate the norms of a given linguistic community and to correct and guide the child’s linguistic behaviour. Another way of putting this is to say that rules of a language are given to a child in two different modes: rules can be demonstrated in the social practices of the given community or they can be explained, that is, given in the form of explicit rule-formulations. Thus, learning a language can be seen as a constructive process which is accomplished by observing the way members of community actually interact with each other or via explicit rule formulations proposed by the members of the community. What is more, language, or better, learned skills to play different language games, do not exist in isolation, but are intertwined with the forms of life of a given community. As verbal behaviour is intimately connected to other forms of activity, this
means that a child learns – and also simultaneously constitutes – a
language as an inseparable part of other conventionalised social practices
of the community. When a language learner finally grasps the rule, s/he
comes to possess a skill and knows ‘how to go on’. And it is by virtue of
knowing rules of language – which is characterized by Wittgenstein as a
skill or mastering a technique – that a language user can use and under-
stand expressions in a correct and conventionalized way. Thus, past uses
of an expression do not determine its meaning potential and subsequent meanings, although from the ontogenetic point of view, mean-
ing potentials arise from actual instances of social interaction in a given community.

On internal and external aspects of rules

For Wittgenstein, language is rule-governed action, that is, action
which is inherently normative in its nature. Rules of language, as
normative phenomena in general, differ from laws of natural sciences
in the sense that they cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed on empiri-
cal (external) grounds. This point is also made explicit by Itkonen (1978:
35) according to whom ‘rules and norms do not exist in space
and time, nor can they be defined in spatiotemporal terms’. In other
words, rules of language – or any other form of social interaction –
cannot be defined on the basis of actual events of usage, because a
reference to factual language use would be an empirical statement
which apparently contradicts the idea of normativity. This idea is
generally regarded as a theoretical cornerstone in Wittgenstein’s philos-
ophy of language, because it ultimately guarantees the autonomy of
grammar (see for example Baker and Hacker 1984, 1986). Thus, for
Wittgenstein the relationship between rules and rule-following behav-
ior is internal, from which it follows that rules cannot be justified
on the basis of external criteria. Wittgenstein’s point is that a rule
exists only if there is activity which counts as following that particular
rule, and consequently, what counts as following a rule is inherent
in the rule itself. In this view, a rule cannot be justified by referring
to any external criteria, such as the community of rule-followers (cf.
Kripke 1982).

Wittgenstein’s insistence on the autonomy of grammar has lead some
commentators to argue that external criteria have no relevance whatso-
ever the description of the relationship between rules and rule-
following behaviour. Baker and Hacker (1985) argue that ‘someone’s
mastery of a technique need not be related to regularity in the behaviour
of others’ (p. 162), because ‘it is not part of the general concept of a practice (or of Wittgenstein’s concept) that it must be shared’ (p. 164). It should be pointed out that the sharpness of the argument is clearly motivated by the fact that it is directed against those who assume that rules and what counts as following a rule could be justified by reference to external criteria or social nature of practices (see Kripke 1982) which Baker and Hacker (1984) see as radically mistaken. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine how this characterization according to which practices are not necessarily social and shared could be relevant from the viewpoint of understanding language or any other social phenomena, for these are, by definition, shared and intersubjective in nature. Thus, it can be argued that although the idea that rules are not necessarily shared is conceptually valid, there clearly are certain problems associated with this view, especially when rule-following is considered as social action which manifests itself in time and space.

The idea that the relation between a rule and rule-following behaviour is internal in nature can be seen as a conceptual necessity. That is, ‘internal relation’ is an essential part of the grammar of ‘rule’. This, however, does not undermine the fact that when people actually make judgements about whether this or that person is following a rule or not, they have no other choice than to rely on external evidence (see Kripke 1982). Let us suppose that there is an alien among us that has gone through a complete metamorphosis and there is no way of telling that the alien from a human being. Its co-aliens have pre-programmed complex sound sequences into its biological computer which makes it possible for it to give a paper on linguistics in English. The paper is brilliant, but the alien does not have a slightest idea what the paper is about, because it, like a biological tape-recorder, only mechanically reproduces sounds that were programmed into it. The question is whether the alien can be said to be following rules of English. We, who know from our God’s-eye perspective what is actually going on, would answer ‘no’ without a hesitation. This is because the behaviour of the alien is not internally related to any rules of English, and the mechanical reproduction of preprogrammed sound sequences is not what we call ‘following a rule’. However, those who actually were listening to the paper have no reason whatsoever to even suspect that there is something fishy going on, for the simple reason that nothing in the behaviour of the speaker indicates that s/he should be an alien who is just mechanically reproducing the text programmed into it. Thus, the point is that although it is a conceptual necessity that rules and norms cannot be determined by a reference to spatio-temporal events, we have
no choice but to refer to public behaviour and use it as a criterion, when we actually make judgements about somebody's following a rule. From an epistemic point of view, this is simply the bedrock where the justification ends. If nothing in the public behaviour of a person indicates the opposite, we take it for granted that s/he is following the same rules as we do.

Let us take another example. A child who is learning English as his/her mother tongue regularly uses such verb forms as *goed* and *readed* instead of grammatically correct *went* and *read*. His/her behaviour clearly exhibits regularity and makes it manifest that s/he has internalised a rule which could be formulated as ‘in English the past imperfect is formed by adding the suffix -ed to the verb root’. His/her actual behaviour is internally related to the rule, and hence we are justified in concluding that s/he is following that particular rule. Thus, it seems that a person may – and one actually often does – construct idiosyncratic rules, and if these rules function as a reason (see Baker and Hacker 1985: 156) for his/her behaviour, it follows that s/he is actually following a rule. This conclusion, however, seems rather counterintuitive. In the above case we would normally say that s/he has not grasped that particular rule of English rather than say that s/he is following some idiosyncratic rule. What this account seems to miss, is that when we talk about practices and customs, we seem to take it for granted that there is more than one person following the same rules, that is, rules are social in nature. Thus, the basic assumption that must be taken for granted is that rules of language are intersubjectively known as a part of a form of life, because otherwise we would fall into the trap of individualism which, in turn, leads to a sceptical view about the possibility of mutual understanding (see Taylor 1992). Furthermore, we understand rules as normative phenomena, that is, we use them as common standards of correctness of behaviour, and also the normative aspect of rules implies that they must be social. Thus, rules that concern language or any other social phenomena are necessarily shared by the members of a community, and the shared nature of rules, in turn, implies that the members of a community must agree on what counts as correct application of a rule.

It is easy to see that the view according to which the relationship between rules and factual rule-following behaviour is to be accounted for in purely internal terms is based on an ontological stance which can be characterized as timeless or achronic. When approached from an emergentist or evolutionary perspective (see Määttä 2000), the external aspects cannot be regarded as totally irrelevant respective to rules. As
Määttä argues, language carries with it its phylogenetic and ontogenetic history and is, therefore, essentially dynamic and cannot be compressed into an achronic ontology. The evolutionary or emergent nature of rules implies that rules are to be seen as both internally and externally related to actual rule-following behaviour. From the ontogenetic point of view the social nature of rules implies that there must also be an external relation between a rule and rule-following, for rules would otherwise be essentially private, which, of course, does not affect the fact that rules are internally related to rule-following behaviour. In this respect, the very fact that an individual has learnt, knows and follows rules can hardly be described without a reference to some external conditions which eventually makes the existence of rules also a social and empirical fact both from ontogenetic and phylogenetic points of view. The social ontology of the ontogenesis of rules is reflected, for instance, in the fact that rules are acquired in social interaction and the behaviour of a language learner is corrected by the other members of community until s/he grasps how to ‘go on’.

Furthermore, according to an emergentist view, rules and rule-following behaviour are interdependent in the sense that rules are constitutive in relation to actual behaviour and are simultaneously (re)constituted by the rule-following behaviour. In other words, rules are internally related to the rule-following behaviour exhibited by the members of community, but actual instances of rule-following simultaneously reflect back on and reconstitute the rules followed. This means that rules are dynamic in nature, as there are rules only if there exist certain spatio-temporal events or action which count as following a rule and are internally related to the rule. As Wright (1963: 7) argues, the rules of a natural language ‘are in a constant growth’, and as a consequence of the dynamics and mutability of rules, ‘[w]hat the rules are at any given moment in the history of a language may not be possible to tell with absolute completeness and precision’. Thus, when the dimension of time is taken into consideration, it seems that rules cannot be accounted for purely in internal terms by relying on an achronic ontology, for rules do not exist in isolation of spatio-temporal rule-following behaviour. This is made explicit also by Nyman (2000: 46) who argues that a language system changes only through micro-level events and, consequently, a parole perspective is conceptually necessary for the ontology and epistemology of language and language change. Thus, it can be suggested that an adequate description of rules must be based on dynamic ontology which can account for their evolutionary nature.
The emergent nature of meaning potentials

Meaning potentials – when understood as rules that concern the normatively correct and conventional use of linguistic expressions – seem to have a Janus-like existence in the sense that, on the one hand, they are constitutive of actual meanings that manifest themselves in particular contexts, but on the other hand do not exist independently of actual acts of meaning-giving which utilise them. Meaning potentials thus seem to be recursive in nature and represent the duality of structure which, according to Giddens (1984), are essential features of all social structures (for discussion, see also Linell 1998: 59–63). In this view, social structures and rules do not exist independently of social agents, but, on the contrary, are to be seen as interdependent. As a consequence of this, rules, and social structures in general, exhibit the duality of structure which means that they can be characterized simultaneously as ‘both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize’ (Giddens 1984: 25). As for meaning potentials, the duality of structure is reflected in the fact that they, on one hand, function as resources for social interaction and, on the other, are constantly recreated and reconstituted in the factual acts of meaning-giving.

When the notion of meaning potential is approached from the viewpoint of ‘use-theory of meaning’, the statement that the meaning potential of a linguistic expression is social in its nature basically boils down to the assumption that the possibility of an expression to mean arises from the social practices of a given community. Furthermore, it can be argued that from the viewpoint of a member of a linguistic community the only evidence s/he has regarding the possibilities of a linguistic expression to mean is based on his/her actual experiences of how other people have used and keep using the expression in different social situations and how they explicitly reflect, correct, and justify their behaviour. Thus, from an ontogenetic point of view the very fact that an individual can use and understand an expression in a normatively correct way is based on his/her experiences of certain spatio-temporal events in which the expression is used or in which its use is explained explicitly. This, in turn, implies that the meaning potential of an expression is not open in the sense that it would be totally open for any interpretation, because meaning potentials are intimately connected with the linguistic biography of an individual which is understood here as a collection of his/her actual experiences of situated verbal behaviour, which utilises and makes manifest linguistic norms of the community (see Lähteenmäki 1998b: 65). In this respect, meaning potentials are not
subjective and random, but on the contrary can be regarded as socially and behaviourally determined in nature.

When meaning potentials and actual meanings are seen as interdependent, the notion of meaning potential can be characterized as a heterogeneous totality of knowledge of conventionalized patterns of normatively correct situated verbal behaviour which manifests itself and emerges from social practices of a given social community. It is also important that different individuals necessarily have partly different meaning potentials for the same expressions, because the inventory of communicative situations one has come across during one's life varies from one person to another. Furthermore, meaning potentials must also be seen as dynamic from the ontogenetic point of view, which implies that the meaning potential of an expression is not identical at different points of time, because every use of an expression potentially effects its future possibilities to mean (Gasparov 1996: 114). In this respect, language learning can be characterized as a life-long project, as language gets updated all the time. It must be emphasized that from the partial uniqueness and dynamic nature of meaning potentials it does not follow that they are subjective and relative in nature, because the individual and unique aspects of meaning potentials also have a firm social and behavioural basis, since they are based on factual spatio-temporal events of social interaction. Meaning potentials are social in nature, because even the unique and individual aspects – which according to the monologistic interpretation are necessarily subjective and relative – have a social and behavioural origin.

Meaning potentials – when viewed as a collection of patterns of conventionalized and normatively correct situated verbal behaviour which arises from the linguistic biography of an individual – can also be regarded as an essential part of the social ‘stock of knowledge’ which makes it possible for agents to act and interact in a meaningful and mutually understandable way. According to Schütz and Luckmann, the stock of knowledge ‘is built on sedimentations of formerly actually present experiences that were bound to situations (1973: 99) ... [and] ... my stock of knowledge is not a logically integrated system, but rather only the totality of my sedimented and situationally conditioned explications, which are composed in part from individual and in part from socially transmitted “traditional” solutions of problems’ (1973: 14). They thus argue that social knowledge is inseparably connected to various social situations and see it as a sedimented heterogeneous totality of knowledge composed of individuals’ actual experiences. In their view, it is also important that members of a certain social community are, in
principle, able to analyse and reflect upon their social knowledge, that is, social knowledge is something that is always within the reach of members of a given community and potentially explicable.

The criterion of explicability of social knowledge bears close resemblance to the later Wittgenstein’s discussions of the notion of rule. Wittgenstein argues that rules should not be regarded as private mental phenomena, but on the contrary should be seen as essentially public and explicable, as they manifest themselves in the social practices of a given community. It is also possible to think that rules – or social knowledge as well – are not categorically distinct from their explicit descriptions, but the ontological status of a rule and its description can be understood in terms of emergentist continuum, as proposed by Määttä (1999). Määttä (1999: 45) argues that in the emergentist approach there is no need to postulate different ontological levels for rule descriptions and rules \textit{an sich}, because description of language can be seen as an emergent part of human language. What is meant by this is that people – both naive language users and experts – are able to reflect upon their language, make generalizations, explicate their knowledge, abstract rules from their language and so forth. Language can be used for various purposes in the social practices of a community, and reflecting upon one’s own language can be regarded as one language game among others. As Määttä (2000) points out, theoretical and lay descriptions of language and explications of rules emerge from social behaviour, but at the same time – as a consequence of their emergent nature – they also reflect back on language and potentially affect the linguistic behaviour of the members of that particular linguistic community.

To sum up, the relationship between meaning potentials and actual meanings, when considered within the framework of a ‘use-theory of meaning’, can be characterized as emergent in its nature. The notion of emergence refers here to a process which can be characterized as essentially cyclical in nature. The cyclicity of emergence implies that meaning potentials and meanings that actualize themselves in specific contexts are not independent of each other, but must be seen as interdependent. The actual meaning of a linguistic expression can be seen as emergent in relation to meaning potential, for it cannot be reduced into the meaning potential, despite the fact that the meaning potential is constitutive of actual contextual meaning. The irreducibility of contextual meanings is based on the fact that they emerge in social interaction in a particular situation in which speaker’s and hearer’s unique perspectives intersect and create something essentially new. As social rules are characterized by the duality of structure (Giddens 1984), it follows that
contextual meanings not only draw upon resources provided by language, but are simultaneously reconstitutive relative to the meaning potentials they utilize. That is, the meaning potential of a linguistic expression can be seen as emergent relative to actual meanings that arise from factual uses of the expression in particular contexts.

Conclusion

The chief aim of this chapter has been to argue that the ‘meaning as potential’ view, as developed by Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Rommetveit, does not represent a relativistic account of meaning, although it rejects the idea that there exist absolute literal meanings. It was suggested that, when considered within the framework of Wittgensteinian ‘use-theory of meaning’, the notion of meaning potential can be given an explication that makes its social nature perspicuous and, consequently, refutes the accusations of its being a relativistic notion. In this view, language is intertwined with the social and cultural practices of a community and can be used to do different things and to pick out specific aspects of reality from various points of view. Thus, there is no one-to-one relationship between linguistic expressions and objects of reality but, rather, the connection between language and reality exists in potentia and is actualized via intersubjective action. As actual acts of meaning-giving are necessarily situated and bound to a certain perspective, it is difficult to see how a linguistic expression could have one definite literal meaning that would characterize all its actual uses. In this respect, linguistic expressions are best characterized as relatively open – but also relatively stable – meaning potentials, and actual meanings, in turn, are seen as emergent properties that arise from language use. Emergence is conceived of as a cyclical process where meaning potentials are constitutive of meanings that actualise themselves in particular contexts, but where actual meanings also reflect back upon and are reconstitutive of meaning potentials. The meaning potential of a linguistic expression reflects the dynamic nature of social practices and consequently can be characterized as a heterogeneous collection of knowledge of conventionalized patterns of normatively correct situated verbal behaviour which manifest themselves and emerge from social practices of a given social community.

Notes

1. In formal semantics the situatedness of meanings is emphasised within the situation theoretic approach, see, for example Barwise and Perry (1981) and Nivre (1992).
2. According to Putnam (1995: 271), Wittgenstein’s remark that the meaning of a word is its use in the language does not, in fact, represent a theory of meaning, but rather questions ‘whether it makes sense to ask for a “theory of meaning” in any sense in which a “theory of meaning” might be metaphysically informative’.

3. The emergence of spatial meanings is discussed in Zlatev 1997.

4. A rather different definition of the notion of literal meaning can be found in Itkonen (1984) who argues that meanings, both sentence and utterance meanings, are inseparable from action. Itkonen (1984: 166) sees literal meaning as ‘as abstract or “frozen” action characterized by a stereotyped intention and performed in a maximally neutral context (but not in a complete void)’.

5. This is also important in respect of Bakhtin’s considerations of ethics and responsibility.

6. For discussion on how ‘social’ and ‘individual’ have been understood in psychology, see Marková (2000).

7. An earlier version of this section has appeared, in Finnish, in Lähteenmäki (2000).

8. Archer (1995: 94) criticizes Giddens’ structuration theory for the reason that, in her view, it denies the existence of emergent properties. However, the basic assumption that underlies Giddens’ account is that social structures are not causally related to the actions of individual agents, and this, in fact, is exactly what emergence is about: actual rule-following behaviour is causally irreducible to rules followed.

9. This view is, I think, compatible with the assumption of connectionism according to which we form flexible models or schemata on the basis of factual spatio-temporal uses. The major difference, however, is that in connectionism the notion of rule and thus normativity are seen as redundant (see Dror and Dascal 1997).

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Recontextualizing Non-Bakhtinian Theories of Language: a Bakhtinian Analysis

Per Linell

Introduction: a Bakhtinian perspective?

In this chapter I will suggest how to ‘think dialogically’ about one particular cultural tradition, that of language studies mainly within one scholarly discipline, namely linguistics. Even if my account will not be a straightforward application of Bakhtinian thinking, it is, I would argue, very much in the spirit of Bakhtin.

Bakhtin was concerned with a dialogical understanding of language and discourse. Moreover, he and Voloshinov (1973) launched a penetrating, partly virulent, critique of structuralist and formalist linguistics. But I will not here deal with Bakhtin’s own views on language. On the contrary, I shall be obsessed with precisely those mainstream, non-Bakhtinian traditions in the language sciences that Bakhtin and Voloshinov criticized so incisively. I shall analyse these monological theories in dialogical terms, assuming that monologism itself exists in a dialogical, sociohistorically constituted context.

Intellectual history as a dialogue of ideas

Dialogues and conversations have many characteristic properties (see Linell 1998a for a comprehensive survey). One is the property of collective development (co-construction); topics and ideas cannot be developed by single individuals (or in the case to be discussed here: schools). Ideas crucially presuppose, and are often responses to, other ideas, and when other people receive and respond to them, they give rise to yet other ideas. Contributions to a dialogue have a Janus-like nature; they are both responses to prior contributions and involve initiatives that define the local context for possible next contributions. Another point
concerns the partial unpredictability of a conversation; the topics can change in so many ways, due to the involvement of many actors and to the combination of numerous internal and external forces and contexts. As a result, dialogues exhibit both continuities and discontinuities. Material which has in some way or another been part of prior discourse, may be recontextualized into novel contexts and new commitments, and the incorporation of ideas from other contexts may lead to the marginalization of aspects which were earlier in focus.

In Linell (forthcoming) I offer an analysis of some themes in the history of linguistics, using an analogy with dialogue or conversation. Its intellectual history is, I would argue, a conversation between traditions, trends, schools and ‘movements’. In other words, I propose to use dialogism as a method of approach, analysis and exposition, and as a way to show the interrelatedness of ideas.

However, the ‘conversation of traditions’ within the socio-cultural context of the history of a discipline is not quite like the situated interaction in an ordinary conversation. The development often spans a very long time period, and participants (authors) often do not directly interact with one another in real time. New commentators often enter the dialogue from a partly distanced position. However, in some respects, this is similar to a multi-party conversation, in which participants come and go, or at least are active only in periods, and in which new episodes are often initiated by particular participants’ recontextualizing material from the prior dialogue, providing new perspectives on the subject matter and locating it in a new argumentative surrounding.

Recontextualizations

In my account, I will apply one particular dialogical notion, that of recontextualization. This may be defined as the dynamic transfer-and-transformation of something from one discourse/text-in-context to another, or from one tradition of discourse to another. Recontextualization involves the extrication of some part or aspect from a text or discourse, or from a genre of texts or discourses, and the fitting of this part or aspect into another context, that is, that of another text/discourse or text/discourse genre. In Goffman’s (1974) terms, recontextualization usually amounts to reframing. Aspects of discourse which can be recontextualized include linguistic expressions, concepts and propositions, ‘facts’, arguments and lines of argumentation, stories, assessments, values and ideologies, knowledge and theoretical constructs, ways of
seeing things and ways of acting toward them, ways of thinking and ways of saying things.

Recontextualizations occur as words and concepts circulate, and are circulated, across domains of practice and knowledge; words and ideas wander from mouth to mouth, and across minds, texts, and discourses, in an intercrossing of contexts and positions. A recontextualization is never a pure transfer of a fixed meaning (cf. Lähteenmäki, Chapter 4, this volume). It involves transformations of meanings and meaning potentials in ways that are usually quite complex and so far not very well understood. It is therefore important to consider recontextualizations themselves as sense-making practices; selected parts of discourses and their meanings in the prior, ‘quoted’ discourse-in-context are used as resources in creating new meaning in the ‘quoting’ text and its communicative contexts. For example, changes in meaning often involve reversals of figure-ground relations; what is central in one context may become peripheral in the other, and vice versa. Recontextualizations are often also reconceptualizations, cognitive ‘reframings’ involving refractions of meaning and mutations of sense and value.4

Linguistics, a disciplined study of language

Recontextualizations of concepts, arguments and theories often occur across disciplines. They may involve priority and perspective reversals, that is, what is assigned primacy in one disciplinary context is treated as secondary, derived or marginal in the other, and what is focused or foregrounded in one is backgrounded in the other. Consider the notion of communication and communicative practices, to which dialogists assign a primary role as the locus for sense-making. At the same time, a language, understood as a set of complex symbolic resources, is seen as abstractions, derived and decontextualized from situated activities in the sociocultural history as well as in the micro-geneses of discourse. However, in linguistics and many other language sciences, perspectives and priorities have predominantly been the reverse. That is, in dialogue theory, communicative practices and language use, pragmatics and speech are in focus, whereas in linguistics, language structure, syntax and semantics are foregrounded, and communication involves the secondary application of language in use.

Linguistics is a discipline with its own history.5 Concepts in linguistics often have a long past, many of them going back to times when linguists (or rather, their predecessors) were engaged in ‘practical’ projects and activities that were subject to political goals and ambitions. These
included establishing standard national languages (which were in part new languages constructed above and beyond what existed beforehand, that is the divergent, spoken vernaculars), standardizing these written norms (national standards to be used in writing and writing-based speech), preserving literate (or even holy) language varieties, describing language so that people could be taught to read and write properly, and to write (and, less often, speak) foreign languages and translate texts between languages, inventing and establishing writing systems for previously unscripted languages (often the transposition and modification of alphabetic writing systems already designed for other languages). I shall later refer back to these projects as the practical activities that originally motivated a theory (or perhaps pre-theoretical thinking) about language.

Modern linguistic theory is, of course, considerably more sophisticated than traditional assumptions about language, and different on many accounts. Yet, it is, I claim, clearly dependent on tacit assumptions of old traditions (which were largely prescriptive in nature), even if the activities now carried out have turned modern and are subject to very different official goals and commitments. Modern linguistics still contains many assumptions about language and languages in general that fit written language much better than spoken language. Accordingly, one can talk about a written language bias in the language sciences (Linell 1982, forthcoming), that is models and methods are heavily influenced by traditions of accounting for written language, and these theories have also been applied to speech and spoken language, or to language in general (irrespective of medium). In Linell (forthcoming), no less than 101 such written-language-based assumptions have been identified, explained and discussed. In this chapter, I have selected only one particular theme from linguistics, namely the notion of a single language (as opposed to, for example, language as a general faculty for language). Other conceptual transformations within the language sciences could have been chosen here; for example, what has happened over time to the distinction between language and speech, the notion of linguistic rule, or the sentence as the basic unit of grammar?

The notion of a language

Let me first summarize the historical development of the theme in terms of a schema.7

The discovery that members of other speech communities speak in ways that are different from those of one’s own group->
the notion of some kind of regularities in the linguistic practices of a speech community

Practical activities dealing with written language (+ experiences of people using other ‘languages’)

the notion of a single unitary language underlying people’s linguistic practices
+ need of a national standard

the notion of a national language (co-constructed by linguists)
+ need of a grammar of this language

the notions of a fixed language with a comprehensive grammar (consisting of words with meaning, pronunciation, and rules of inflection, derivation and syntactic combination)
+ theory of structural integration of a language system (analogies with biological organisms, and (later:) social structures)

Saussure’s structuralist conception of la langue, that is a complete, integrated, word-based system (one context-free system) representing a language
+ development of linguistic theory to include (sentence) syntax

sentence-based model of a language (surface language, ‘external’ language)
+ idea of a language as defined by a well-defined, finite system of formalised rules (the mathematical notion of a language)

sentence-based generative model (with deep-structural and surface-structural aspects), i.e. system underlying surface regularities (the surface language being clearly demarcated)
+ the idea of the idealised individual’s (speaker–listener’s) knowledge of his language

internalized language (Chomskyan ‘competence’)

cognitive realities underlying a language (with even more priority to abstract units; moving from ‘external language’ to ‘internal language’, i.e. the language faculty of grammatical principles as part of the human biological constitution (the grammar of a universal language).

This extremely complex, meandering flow of ideas, the web or chain of recontextualizations, summarized in the nutshell formulation above, involves many transitions, which would all deserve a lengthy account. I can only comment briefly on some of them.
Specific, individual languages, such as English, Russian or Thai, do not have the self-evident and independent existence and unitary nature that we have been enticed into believing from the ways they are talked about in everyday life and in traditional schooling. It is an illusion that there is such a thing as one single, unitary language, exactly as described by linguists, out there. At least, this ‘object’ of linguistic description was not there from the beginning; at the outset there were simply the various spoken vernaculars. Creating a national language has always and everywhere been a political project; the national state needs one language, just as it has often required one church, one army and one monetary system.

National languages have of course most often been based on spoken vernaculars, sometimes mainly on one prestige variety. When dialects were related and perhaps mutually intelligible, there was a basis for developing an abstract standard to be used in writing, for purposes like legislation, education and administration. But the notion of ‘the national language’ is largely a cultural and socio-political artefact, not something descriptive of empirically existing, spoken, linguistic activities. A national standard language does not correspond to a natural speech community comprising all those who are considered citizens or subjects of the nation. On the other hand, once written standards have been created, legitimized and taught for generations, standard languages have of course tended to become social realities, materialized in writing and to some extent also in speech.

Among the practical and political activities in which linguists have always, or at least during the last two or three centuries, been involved are those of planning, standardizing and describing national written languages. One of Roy Harris’s (1980) main points is therefore that linguists are language-makers. According to him, linguistic theories and descriptions are more of products of the linguists’ own language-defining activities than adequate accounts of an objectively given reality (‘language’). This implies that language itself, as described by linguists, and, in particular, unitary individual languages are things constructed, ‘made’, partly even fabricated, rather than something given and existing out there.

National linguistic standards call for good descriptions. Creating descriptive accounts involved normative attempts to constrain variation and to make points of language structure more precise than they appear to be in the bewildering world of language use (what Saussure came to call la parole). The project of standardising languages included a strong tendency to freeze, or fixate, the systems. This was necessary as part of the practical activities (see above), involving (especially) written language. The written standard should be unitary. However, a crucial conceptual
step was taken later, when the implicit assumption was made that a language as a system was somehow fixed in itself, out there, rather than merely fixated by human users for particular purposes related to writing and literacy. Thus, for example, words came to be thought of as having fixed meanings, ready to be documented in dictionaries, rather than open, variable meanings that get fixated in and through the activities of making dictionaries.

The most basic notion in the pre-theoretical thinking about language was clearly that of the ‘word’. Descriptions of a language therefore included descriptions of how words are pronounced (phonology), how they were inflected, derived and used in combinations (morphology, and grammar, which included only a rudimentary portion of (what would nowadays be thought of as) syntax), and what they meant (lexicology, as made manifest in dictionaries). Once again, we must recall the historical origins, that the practical activities in which language study originated were closer to language pedagogy than to linguistic theorising of a modern kind. Words (pronunciations, morphological properties, lexical meanings) could be more easily described and taught than syntax.

The traditional language descriptions that I have just alluded to, fall short of being complete or integrated models in a modern sense, and it is probably fair to say to that most traditional grammarians, while being obviously aware of some of the systematicity of linguistic phenomena, did not think of a language as an integrated system which could be exhaustively defined in a way that excluded contradictions and fuzzy boundaries. In other words, the assumption of a language as a fixed code was arguably not entirely all-inclusive in traditional grammar.

Saussure (1916/1964) has usually been given credit for having developed the idea of a complete, integrated system underlying and defining each individual language: la langue. It amounts to an important recontextualisation when the traditional ideas of a language were combined with the idea of the complete grammar. But the idea of an integrated system had been envisaged also in several 19th century conceptions. Following upon the neogrammarian discovery of sound laws came the idea of languages as organisms that grow and change, partly in analogy with biological species. This was part of the intellectual background for the Saussurean idea of a language system, a ‘langue’, as an integrated structure. However, the Saussurean idea appears in the context of a structural conception of social systems, including language as a primary case. (Saussure’s linguistics has traditionally been thought of as linked to Durkheim’s sociology®). Now, not only should the linguistic description be made (constructed as) more comprehensive and systematic than
before, but the whole enterprise was based on the theoretical idea of a
language in itself being a complete, integrated system out there. This
linguistic system was supposed to be ‘context-free’ in the sense that it is
valid across genres and situated activities of language use. But it is
interesting to note that Saussure did not include sentence syntax, let
alone text-linguistic regularities above the sentence level, within la
langue. Thus, while a language was essentially an integrated relational
system (‘form’ rather than ‘substance’), its primary units were still
words, rather than sentences. Later 20th century linguists, notably
Chomsky (1957, 1965 and so on), were to change this view, as part of
subsequent recontextualizations.

The view that a language consists of a set of fixed, thing-like products
is a recurrent theme in the linguistic literature. One of the most well-
known definitions is the following: ‘From now on I will consider a lan-
guage to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length
and constructed out of a finite set of elements’ (Chomsky 1957: 13).

What is the source of the view underlying this quote? In Chomsky’s
case the inspiration came, at least partly, from mathematics, where a
language is precisely a set of strings of symbols which are defined by a
set of specific and explicit rules. (Note, by the way, that mathematical
symbol languages are a highly specialized kind of written languages.)
But the view of language as a structured set of products (rather than
processes and underlying capacities) goes much further back in history.
The fact is that linguistics has always been biased towards analysing
products, first and foremost written sentences and texts (Voloshinov
1973). But there are deeper and more traditional roots. Within a more
narrowly American horizon, Derwing (1979: 165) wanted to derive some
of the characteristics of American linguistics, the emphasis on products
and the view of language as something autonomous, from Bloomfield’s
methodological recommendations. Bloomfield (1933) argued that lin-
guists must concentrate on the structure of overt behaviour, since we
cannot speculate on the underlying processes out of lack of the neces-
sary knowledge of physiology and psychology. This heritage had an
impact on later American linguistics, including Chomskyan generative
linguistics; there are more similarities between Chomsky’s and Katz’s
(1964) psycho-linguistics and variants of multi-stage behaviorism than
is usually thought (Linell 1979).

We note that in Chomsky’s early conception, the grammar of sen-
tences is both context-free and clearly demarcated. It is context-free9 in
the sense that the determination of grammaticality never relies on con-
siderations of textual environments and communicative contexts. It is
completely demarcated in that a sharp boundary can be drawn between what is grammatical, that is included with the language (what later came to be called the ‘external’ language), and what is not. If prior linguistics had ascribed a certain stability or rigidity to the language system, Chomsky now proposed the stronger notion of well-definedness as a substitute.

Another remarkable thing in Chomsky’s early definition (as quoted above) is that a language is (still) regarded as the set of all the linguistic products that can be constructed according to certain rules. An alternative, and (one might think) intuitively more satisfactory, view would be that a language consists of all the units and rules which make up the system underlying the products. From the vantage point of the language user one could propose a more psychologically based definition: The language of a speaker/listener is his knowledge of the underlying language system (la langue), or alternatively, his ability to produce and comprehend an infinite set of utterances, discourses and texts, which fit the underlying system of rules. This soon became the position of Chomsky (for instance 1965). Superficially, this also ties up with a tradition exemplified by Humboldt’s proposal that language be regarded as an activity (and an ability to act linguistically) (energeia) rather than as a set of products (ergon).

Saussure’s abstract system of la langue consisted of the linguistically significant properties of a language. The notion was the outcome of an attempt to cleanse language from all those linguistically irrelevant factors (psychological, contextual) that confound the view if we look at situated discourse (la parole). Chomsky (1965) adopts very much the same attitude in distinguishing competence from performance. For Saussure, a language (langue) was a superindividural, collective, socioculturally constituted system. But languages are also mastered and used by individuals. Rommetveit (1998: 179) points out that there has been a ‘pervasive duality’ in scientific studies of language between the notions of ‘a system existing in a collectivity’ and ‘individual linguistic competence and language processing’. This is at the heart of the next steps in our nutshell formulation of recontextualizations, especially the chain ‘la langue> generative model of language > internalization within the ideal speaker-listener (competence).’ First, an abstract model of language was defined, ‘an analysis [which] proceeds by first “bracketing off” content, social relations, and historical forces and then isolating a transcendent, hierarchical, and autonomous system’ (Nystrand et al. 1993: 292). Then, this system was put back by Chomsky (and his psycholinguistic followers) into the ‘ideal speaker-listener’ and declared ‘psychologically real’. Thus,
one outcome of the developments in the US. was psycholinguistics, an offspring of a formalistic generative model of language in linguistics and a mentalistic psychology, largely defined in opposition to behaviourism. It is obvious that this development involves very complex recontextualizations in which ideas from the past are combined with new demands in a rather different context. For example, we have already pointed to the behaviourist heritage still entertained in some interpretations of mentalism (Katz 1964), and similar ambiguities are involved in the use of terms like ‘rule’ and ‘process’. At several points, this generated a good deal of confusion.

When Chomsky (1965) chose to start out from the individual speaker-listener, he was surely influenced by the individualism that has been a trademark of American variants of social and human sciences (for instance Farr 1996; Rommetveit 1998). However, Chomsky’s notion was a strange mixture, as is easily seen in his definition from Chomsky (1965: 3):

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

(op. cit.: 3, italics added)

Here, we are faced with a completely decontextualised, detemporalized and disembodied concept of language. It is also a prototypically monological theory, with its notion of a monolithic system, and the absolute authority assigned to, on the one hand, this system and, on the other, the cognizing individual (although the latter is not thematized here). The pivot of the theory is the ‘ideal’ individual, defined exclusively in terms of his membership within a ‘completely homogeneous’ community in which a ‘language’ is used. In other words, this may be taken as a recontextualization of Saussure’s notion in terms that sound individualistic. But later, Chomsky (1965, and especially 1968 and later) declared that linguistics was to be understood as part of cognitive psychology. Cognition has, in mainstream (particularly American) psychology, been concerned with mental processes within the individual. At the same time, a generative grammar, based on abstract formal rules of syntax, was assumed to be the adequate model of the language. Such a strongly transformed version of la langue, now termed competence, was now assumed to be internalized by the language user.
We have seen that Chomsky took over a legacy from many of his predecessors, including Saussure. But he had some more radical points on his agenda too. George Lakoff mentions, in an interesting interview on early Chomskyan linguistics (Huck and Goldsmith 1995: 109ff.), four ‘commitments’ that were of central importance for generativists of the 1960s:

(i) ‘the Chomskyan commitment’: language (itself, the thing in the world) is a formal symbol system. That is, Chomsky inaugurated a formalistic linguistics in a particularly strong form; ‘for Chomsky, generalization meant generalization over form alone, not over meaning’ (Lakoff in Huck and & Goldsmith, 1995: 111). Syntax was to be autonomous and free from dependencies on semantics; this stance sounds a bit ironic, given that Chomsky (1959) has been given so much credit for having killed behaviorism.

(ii) ‘the Fregean commitment’: language, including semantics, should be formalised (using formal logic, model theory, and so on).

(iii) ‘the generalization/full range commitment’: an adequate grammar must seek maximal generalizations.

(iv) the cognitive commitment; one must take empirical results about the nature of the mind seriously and make the theory of language fit with those results.

The first three commitments pertain to (the early) Chomsky’s preference for modelling a language in mathematical-language terms; one should strive not only for explicitness but also for compactness, conciseness, elegance and exhaustiveness. But Chomsky also introduced the fourth commitment, although he remained very ambivalent with respect to it. (Lakoff argues that he (Lakoff) ranked the cognitive requirement highest.) Chomsky was, after all, not prepared to take mental processing models seriously; *competence* could not be understood in any performance-oriented terms, not even in terms of an ‘idealized’ performance model. Thus, Chomsky stayed mainly with the three first-mentioned commitments, those which were most clearly based on notions derived from written-language-based linguistics.

The last steps in the recontextualising chain formulated *in nuce* above also involves far-reaching transformations. Chomsky and his close followers have turned away from the task of describing ‘surface’ languages (*E*(xternal) languages’), that is languages (*langues*) such as English, Russian or Thai. The notion of (a) ‘language is a derivative and perhaps not very interesting concept’, Chomsky (1980: 10) declared. An even
more radical formulation was used by Smith (1999: 38): ‘The notion E-language is empty of content and correspondingly unnecessary.’ This implies much less emphasis than before on notions like ‘grammaticality’. Chomsky’s interests are now instead, even more decisively than before, first (for instance 1981) on core grammars and on ‘principles’ of universal grammar (Internal language), and more recently (1995) on ‘minimalist’ assumptions of structure associated with the underlying language capacity. Surface sentences are no longer the basic units of a language; rather, we are dealing with more abstract principles of grammatical construction, which are assumed to be innate, that is inherent in the human biological constitution. The endeavours of theoretical linguists are assumed to be directed at finding basic functions of the mind, and ‘when we speak of the mind, we are speaking at some level of abstraction of yet unknown physical mechanisms of the brain’ (Chomsky 1988: 7). ‘“Internal” [in the term I-language] means that the domain that the linguist is studying is internal to the mind-brain of particular speakers and hearers, rather than expressing a relation between the mind and the outside world’ (Smith 1999: 138).13

When dialogists say that the notion of ‘a language’ is derivative, they mean that it is derived by abstraction and (re)construction from situated, practical and embodied activities. Chomsky, on the other hand, has something completely different in mind, when he says that the notion of a ‘language’ is ‘derivative’ (and ‘perhaps not very interesting’); languages have been derived by sociohistorically constituted cultures from what is ‘interesting’, namely the universal language faculty.

Let me summarize my review of theories of what language, and a language, is with the conclusion that there is a long chain of transformations with links that provide a continuity backwards; adjacent links interlock as do often sequences in a dialogue or conversation (Linell 1998a). And yet, just like in a conversation, the topics can change radically over time. The changes from the pre-theoretical notion of a (national) language to Chomsky’s notion of ‘internal language’ seem to involve an almost complete change of topic. It involves the cleansing of language from culture; we move from a notion of a language embedded in talk, writing, communicative practices and partly national cultures to another notion of language liberated from culture and remote from communicative practices.

Also within the more limited time perspective of only (or mainly) Chomskyan linguistics of the second half of the 20th century, there are continuities as well as radical changes. Chomsky (1957) was largely concerned with ‘external’ languages, such as English, while Chomsky
For the early Chomsky, the grammar was context-free (in the sense used here) and the (external) language was completely demarcated, whereas today, the internal grammar of the language faculty is still context-free, but there is no grammar that completely defines, or demarcates, the external language. In the beginning, there was the notion of one language in the sense of one external language. Now, unity and uniqueness is defined at an entirely different level, that of a universal language, one language faculty.

Conclusions

Our example shows how a notion like a ‘language’ has taken on many shapes and meanings in the history of linguistics, and that these can be understood as outcomes of a dialogue between traditions, schools and ideas involving countless recontextualisations. A theoretical contribution cannot be understood in isolation from the ideas, voices and sociocultural conditions that preceded it, nor is our understanding of it unaffected by the many reinterpretations that have arisen as responses to it. As Nystrand et al. (1993) point out in a somewhat similar analysis, the ‘formative’ and ‘receptive’ contexts must be examined. A dialogical - Bakhtinian – analysis of the conceptual evolution is highly relevant also for a discipline like mainstream linguistics, which many regard simply as a cumulative and rational science.

In focusing on the dialogue between ideas, I have, in part, diminished the importance of single individuals, emphasizing instead their dependence on the sociohistorical and semiotic web in which their work is interwoven. In focusing on the ideas as such, I have largely neglected the sociocultural contexts in which the historical developments have taken place. From a dialogic point-of-view, this is an obvious limitation, which can be defended chiefly by reference to space restrictions. Nevertheless, the analysis is based on an historical, or perhaps genealogical, order of events, rather than just being an account of the logical order of ideas.

In the sociohistorical dialogue, ideas from one tradition may be grafted onto other traditions. The resulting transformations of ideas are sometimes fairly radical, as I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter. As I noted at the outset, recontextualizations are bound to involve transmutations of meaning and import. Often enough, we can witness reversals of perspectives and of core–periphery relations, that is relations between what is in focus of attention and what is marginalized, what is foregrounded vs backgrounded. Such reversals will almost necessarily be
at hand when practical utility, which is privileged in practical and political activities, gets backgrounded in favour of the quest for scientific truth in projects within theoretical linguistics. However, the ultimate subject matter – communicative activities, language, discourse – will remain partly the same, and as we can see, words and concepts used to describe and explain the phenomena often remain partly the same, thereby causing a good deal of confusion.

I claimed in the introduction that modern linguistic theory cannot liberate itself completely from ‘folk models’ of language, and that it is still dependent on products of traditions of scholarly activities that were largely prescriptive in nature. Dispositions to think and use language in specific ways, in our case about language itself, appear to change more slowly than the sociocultural conditions that gave rise to them. The same seems to be quite typical of many other grand-scale recontextualizations (cf. Linell 1998a). In our case of a body of ‘written-language bias’ assumptions, the most comprehensive grand-scale recontextualization resides in the comprehensive move from various practical activities to the purely scientific contexts. The practical activities are situated, subject to specific conditions, and typically related to writing and reading, and to language pedagogy. It may be reasonable to use words and concepts about language in conventional ways as long as we are still concerned with talking in and about those practical activities in which they have their origin. This, however, is no warrant for their motivated status as assumptions in the general theories of language, discourse and communication (Segerdahl 1998; Bourdieu 2000). Bourdieu (op. cit.) describes what he calls the ‘scholastic fallacy’ in philosophy and social sciences; particular cases have been universalised, and the sociohistorical (and semiotic) environments in which ideas originally were made possible have largely sunk into oblivion. The overall development in linguistics, which Bourdieu could have used as a major case in point, is from activity-specificity (activities being related to specialized, or in some cases, generalized variants of written language and literate culture) to universalizing claims about language in general, including spoken language as the primary form, and from practical and normative concerns to descriptive (and explanatory) ambitions.

Modern linguistics is characterized by the deliberate forgetting or denial of history, and an analysis of the sociohistorical ‘conversation’ is important for precisely this reason. People actively engaged and engrossed in using words and concepts are not necessarily aware of the fact that they are involved in recontextualizing actions, in which the words, concepts and arguments are, as it were, ‘quoted’ from original
contexts and used in new (‘quoting’) contexts (Linell 1998a). The words of the other, of generations of quite different linguists, have been appropriated in new contexts, occupied and populated without a full awareness of their origins. Yet, the scientific texts come forward as almost monological, with this dependence on others’ voices next to concealed; in Bakhtinian terms, it is a case of passive or weak dialogicality (cf. Morson and Emerson 1990).

I would argue that the history of linguistics (or of any other scientific or non-scientific activity) includes many examples of the following two cases. Both are lacking in self-reflection and fail to do the necessary historical analyses, but they err in contrary ways. On the one hand, there are those cases where actors erroneously believe that they are dealing with the same concepts because they use the same words about what is ultimately largely the same subject matter. They know that the activity contexts and theoretical frames are very different, and yet they ignore, forget about or remain blind to the effects of the new contexts. But these contexts may entail perhaps radical differences in the semantic jobs that the words do. Partly the same words are still used, but the concepts formed in new contexts may be radically different from those used in the prior context, and arguments are often only seemingly similar to what was used in the original frames.

On the other hand, there are also cases where actors have cut off links with their history and believe that they can use the words in new contexts without bothering about the historical loadings words carry with them. Rather, the new generations tend to declare, often quite arrogantly, that aspects of oldtimers’ systems that do not fit the new molds are irrelevant. This has often been true of modern American linguistics, where the knowledge of history has typically been quite rudimentary. Chomsky and his followers have never mentioned, let alone acknowledged, the importance of the heritage of the ‘written language bias’ in linguistics.

Words carry along parts of their history, even when we use them for novel purposes in new contexts. Even if this may produce confusion, it enables us to establish contact with our intellectual history; we must use our common, culturally inherited language as a source for our scholarly meta-language. This is also why it becomes so important to reflect upon what the recontextualisations consist in, and to become reflexively aware of what our scientific activities, including the use of language, involve.

It is not so easy to cleanse meaning of surviving connotations. Words are never innocent; they have been touched by others. They record
traces of the contexts through which they have passed. Hilary Putnam noted that:

Using any word - whether the word be ‘good’, or ‘conscious’, or ‘red’, or ‘magnetic’ - involves one in a history, a tradition of observation, generalization, practice or theory. It also involves one in the activity of interpreting that tradition and adopting it to new contexts, extending and criticizing it.

(1981: 203)

In the context of this chapter, which has made ample use of Bakhtinian notions, it seems appropriate to finish by quoting his famous dictum that words carry their history with them:

The life of a word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another, from one generation to another. In this process the word does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from these concrete contexts into which it has entered.

(Bakhtin 1984: 202)

Notes

1. Work on this chapter was supported in part by two grants from the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, No. 1995–5123 and No. J2001–0054.
2. Dialogism as a framework for the study of mind, culture and activity has a long past, although it has seldom been a dominant position in scientific communities. Among 20th century traditions, it has roots in, for instance, phenomenology, American pragmatism, Wittgenstein’s ‘language game’ theory, and sociocultural theories of activity types and semiotic mediation (for instance Vygotsky and Bakhtin as discussed by for instance Wertsch 1997). It shares insights with many empirical approaches to spoken interaction (Linell 1998a). Accordingly, there is now a burgeoning tradition of what might be termed interdisciplinary dialogue studies (for instance Marková and Foppa 1990, 1991; Heen Wold 1992; Rommetveit 1992; Wertsch 1997; Linell 1998a; Marková 2003).
3. Such an analysis of a discipline is thus opposed to a ‘narrowly preconceived model of scientific development’, describing the evolution of the discipline as a ‘continuously progressive path to the present’, usually using an ‘uncritical chronicling’ of the contributions by great scientists (cf. Ash 1983: 143).
4. While ‘recontextualization’ is originally a text-based notion, for instance as it is implied in the work of Bakhtin and Kristeva, or used in explicating the reproduction of knowledge (Bernstein 1990), I argue (see Linell 1998a,b) that it is of fundamental importance to all cognition and communication, including
in particular talk-in-interaction (a contention which is, by the way, in the
spirit of Bakhtin).
5. Textbooks on the history of linguistics include Robins (1967), Malmberg
6. These and other cases are analysed in Linell (Forthcoming).
7. The italicised parts below refer to practical activities or theoretical ideas
belonging to relevant contexts. Bold-face words index different versions of
what ‘a language’ is.
8. Some commentators (for instance Thibault 1997: 48) argues that this pre-
supposes an extreme reading of Saussure.
9. The term ‘context-free’ has often been given other meanings in grammar
theory.
10. Smith (1999) claims that this was Chomsky’s position from the very begin-
nning and that he never really espoused the view of a language as a set of
surface sentences, as formulated in Chomsky (1957). Smith (ibid.: 32) is of the
opinion that interpreters have misleadingly assigned too much importance
to Chomsky (1957), ‘which, despite its seminal role, was basically a set of
notes for an undergraduate course at MIT ...’. If this is so, it does of course
not invalidate my analysis of the origin of this view and the fact that it was,
after all, explicitly communicated in Chomsky (1957) (cf. quote above).
11. Chomsky (1965: 4, 8, et passim) pays tribute to Humboldt, in spite of the fact
that his own theorising is quite different from Humboldt’s on many
accounts.
12. Lakoff was one of Chomsky’s most famous students in the 1960s, who later
became a renegade and a strong critic of Chomsky.
13. Thus, I-language, as ‘a technical term’ ‘indicates a state of the mind/brain’.
(Smith 1999: 38).
14. In Nystrand’s (1999) terms, it is a study of ‘the semiotics of influence’.
15. Thus, the analysis, is, I think, example from Bourdieu’s (2000: 43–8) harsh
critique of ‘ahistorical philosophizing histor[ies] of ideas’, usually involving
an idea of cultural evolution consisting quite simply of successively more
advanced stages of knowledge.
16. One should note, however, that the scientific activities, in which one looks
for general theories, are also situated and subject to their specific conditions.
They are ‘situated decontextualising practices’ (Linell 1998a: ch. 14).
17. The same is true of other disciplines, for instance psychology (cf. Ash 1983).

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6
Language, Thinking and Embodiment: Bakhtin, Whorf and Merleau-Ponty

Hannele Dufva

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the relationship between language, thinking and culture and aim to combine three different frameworks. I will start with Benjamin Lee Whorf's (1897–1941) work. I will argue in line with, for instance, Lee (1996) that the arguments which have later been known as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, or the hypothesis of linguistic relativity, have been largely misinterpreted within linguistic sciences since the 1950s. Apart from some early dissident voices, for instance Dan Alford's work,1 Whorf's ideas have started gaining wider understanding only recently (see for instance Gumperz and Levinson 1996).

I will also attempt to show how Whorf's ideas can be combined with some of the claims presented by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and the members of the Bakhtin Circle, particularly V. N. Voloshinov (for an introduction to the Bakhtin Circle, see Brandist 2002). Although Bakhtin's work has been long recognized within literary and cultural studies, the interest in the Bakhtin Circle among linguists is recent. It was first brought to the common awareness by Ragnar Rommetveit in his influential writings (see for instance Rommetveit 1992) and has since been developed (see Linell 1998; Lähteenmäki 2002, 2003).

Last, I will attempt to show how the views of Whorf and Bakhtin can be combined with the phenomenological notion of embodiment, as discussed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61).

Although these three figures were roughly speaking contemporaries, contacts between them were indirect only. Thus, the similarities in their thought can be attributed to some common sources and some features typical to the general intellectual atmosphere of the pre-World War II era. These sources include continental philosophy, especially
neo-Kantianism and phenomenology, pre-structuralist views on language (for instance Humboldtian ideas) and such psychological views as Gestalt psychology or Henri Bergson’s views. These views have been largely ignored in the later study of language and cognition, which came to be dominated by the Northern American tradition of Chomskyan linguistics and cognitive psychology (for a critical discussion of this type of ‘cognitivism’, see Still and Costall 1991; Smith et al. 1995; Dufva 1998).

To what extent can the thinking of Whorf, Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty be described under a common label? It is hard to see them as representatives of a common paradigm. Rather, they were all individual thinkers who thought along similar, occasionally intersecting and intertwining lines, some of which I aim at making explicit here. Also, what is common to them is that they each seem to have their say in the contemporary discussion on cognition. And, as Gardiner (1998: 132) notes, discussing Merleau-Ponty and Bakhtin, they seem to address certain ‘ethical, epistemological and ontological pitfalls of modernity in strikingly similar terms’. To this we may here add a link to Whorf.

In attempting a description that would not only characterise these thinkers, but which would also be helpful in furthering the psychology of language, two central notions present themselves. The first one is a non-dualist and non-Cartesian position that is typical to all three. Different as their writings on this point are, they can all be seen critics of the dualist mind/body and mind/world ontology. In contemporary terms they would seem to stress the embodied and situated nature of cognition. In that, they may all be seen as precursors of an emerging paradigm in cognitive science that is redefining cognition in a way that resembles their arguments (see for instance Clark 1997).

The second commonality between Bakhtin, Whorf and Merleau-Ponty is to be found in the views they present on the relationship between universal and particular in language and cognition. This is of particular importance for linguistic theorizing. As the Chomskyan emphasis on universalism has been a default assumption in both theoretically and cognitively oriented linguistics for such a long time, it is not necessary to repeat its tenets here. A textbook presentation that also beautifully exemplifies how Chomskyan linguistics sees Whorf can be found in Pinker (1994). So instead of focusing on the mainstream view, I will explore its alternative, as expressed by Whorf, Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty. It is common to all three – in different ways – to stress the situatedness of cognitive and linguistic experiences, which thus implies also their focus on particularity. The perspective that is afforded
us by our individual life history and by our cultural and linguistic environment shapes the way we are. This is a view opposite to the mainstream universalism and stresses the importance of variation and diversity in human cognizing (see for instance Bakhtin 1986: 101; Whorf 1956: 244–55). This theoretical assumption also has important methodological consequences.

Having said this, I will also argue that it is mistaken to dismiss these thinkers as extreme or naive relativists, as has been done especially with Whorf. Just because of their basically nondualist argumentation, they all clearly see also the commonality in language and thinking. What is different from the rationalist and nativist explanation of universality is that the common features are not explained by assuming universal innate species-specific faculties for language and thought. Rather, the commonality is found in the shared embodiment and in the dialogical relationship that exists between embodied agents and their world.

There are also similarities between the three thinkers in their insights as to the position of the human sciences in the field of sciences. To somewhat different extents, they all seem to seek for a synthesis to the antithetical opposition between positivism and hermeneutics, seeking for a reunion between human and natural sciences, but arguing for a clearly non-positivist view which would rely on interpretation rather than explanation, and which would still have the human experience as its focus.

Linguistic relativity: the Whorfian view

Benjamin Lee Whorf was first trained in natural sciences, majoring in chemical engineering. His interest in the origin of languages and writing systems drew him towards linguistics and after becoming acquainted with Edward Sapir – one of the foremost representatives of anthropological linguistics in the USA – he became particularly interested in the indigenous languages of America and carried out his famous research on the relationship between language and thought. The intellectual background of Whorf is thus both in natural sciences and in Northern American anthropologically oriented linguistics where he had such predecessors as Edward Sapir, Franz Boas and W. D. Whitney. Whorf published fairly little during his lifetime, and it was only fifteen years after his untimely death that a collection of his papers was edited and published, by John B. Carroll (Whorf 1956).

To a great extent, later American linguistics rejected the anthropologically oriented views and followed the structuralist route pioneered
by Leonard Bloomfield. The structuralist study of language, being formally oriented, paid little or no attention to meaning-oriented issues or language use in context. With its anti-mentalist focus, it was self-evident that the relationship between language and thinking was hardly studied at all within structuralism. During the 1950s, linguistics turned to studying mental phenomena once again, but this was done in a decidedly rationalist manner, under the influence of Noam Chomsky’s ideas. Thus, language and thought came to be seen as innate and universal faculties, separate from and independent of each other. Whorf’s views were then becoming increasingly unfashionable and opposed, starting from the mildly critical views in the early 1950s (see for instance Brown and Lenneberg 1954) and ending with downright ridicule and dismissal as unscientific (see for instance Pinker 1994: 59–67).

In his own time, Whorf was not such a theoretically lonely figure as he may seem to be to posterity. For the present argument, the most important similarities may be those that can be found with the European linguistic schools originating in Wilhelm von Humboldt’s work. Such names as Ernst Cassirer, Leo Weisgerber or Jost Trier can be mentioned here (see for instance an early article of Basileus (1952) drawing attention to similarities between Sapir and ‘these Neo-Humboldtians’). Cassirer (1992: 133), for example, argued that each language has a different world-view, ‘an intellectual structure of its own’. Similarly, the best-known claim by Whorf says that the mental world of individuals is closely related to the properties of the language they speak. For example, a Hopi speaker who only knows his own language, according to Whorf (1956: 57) has a different habitual notion of time and space from an average speaker of English, because the verbal means expressing time differ in these two languages.

Thus, according to Whorf, physical reality may be interpreted slightly differently in different cultures. The raw data, or the impressions we have of the world, have to be organized and, as Whorf (1956: 213) argues, they are organized largely by the routes that are offered by our first language: ‘We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare the observer in the face, on the contrary, world is represented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds.’

This claim has later become known as the Sapir-Whorf ‘hypothesis’, an ill-chosen term that neither Sapir nor Whorf themselves used. As Lee (1996: 85–6) argues, it is to be seen as an axiom rather than a
hypothesis. Not only was the name misleading, but also the argument itself was maimed to the extent that one can hardly recognise it. To bring home the tenets of new (Chomskyan) linguistics, Whorf was in many cases misquoted and misread, as has been shown by for instance Lee (1996), Ellis (1993) and Alford (1982). Over the years, the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis became a standard textbook example of linguistic hypotheses proved wrong.

One clear case of misreading is to claim that Whorf advocated linguistic determinism, a claim that one’s mother tongue would determine the scope of one’s cognitive processes. This is in clear contrast with what Whorf actually wrote. To start with, language could not determine thinking, because Whorf did not consider language and thought as two separate phenomena (or domains, or faculties) as the next generation of linguists did. Thus there could be no such causal relationship between them that one domain could affect or determine the other. Rather, what Whorf held was that language is one of our ways of thinking. He explicitly wrote that language was not identical with thought: thinking was linguistic ‘to a large extent’, not exclusively (Whorf 1956: 66). Thus language did not determine thinking, but instead ‘influenced’ the way we think by actually being a part (but only a part) of how we think.

Neither did Whorf emphasize the determinist character of this influence. Language does not determine how we see, hear and taste, or how each of us constructs our everyday reality. What Whorf argued, however, was that once a phenomenon, an object, a quality of an object, or an action is named and talked about, using the conventional linguistic means offered by the linguistic context, it is also made more salient. Whorf stressed that the perceptual ground (along with the perceptual capacities and processes) is basically similar for humans, but is nevertheless a ground only. From the ground, we pick particular patterns, some phenomena that are more salient than others. This salience is partly brought about by the linguistic patterns and discursive practices of our linguistic community. And, as languages use different patterns, the world views will differ: ‘We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated’ (Whorf 1956: 214).

Brown and Lenneberg (1954: 481) – and many people quoting them – claim that Whorf thought individuals incapable of perceiving differences that were not verbalized in their language. This view is not found in Whorf’s writings. Quite to the opposite, Whorf presumed that all
human groups have a similar ability of perceiving reality (Whorf 1956: 163–4, 267). In other words, ‘the forms and laws of visual perceptions are the same for all individuals – even the most glaring abnormalities, like color-blindness, are relatively minor, and do not disturb the universal configurative principles of visual perception’ (Whorf and Trager 1938: 7; published in Lee 1996: 251–80).

Thus Whorf argues (1956: 162) that individuals who grow up in different linguistic communities tend to pick up slightly different perceptions (or Gestalts) simply because their language tends to make some things easier to talk about (see also Lee 1996: 90). It is also important to note that linguistic relativity – in Whorf’s own version – suggests that although there are conventional routes that are easy to follow, these routes are not determinist in character. Each language opens up a particular perspective, which is not, it should be stressed, totally different from other potential perspectives.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Whorf does not belittle the influence of our first languages on our world-views either. Linguistic choices may really make us see things differently and perhaps do things differently. As Whorf (1956: 262) argued, the fact that we call a wave ‘a wave’ guides us to also see waves – instead of the ‘surface in ever-changing undulating motions’, what the Hopi would call walalata ‘plural waving occurs’. Thus classifying something as a noun makes it easier to experience it as an object than as a process or an action. The words, metaphors, idioms and discourses that are conventional also have an influence on our thought and guide us to see reality in linguistic terms. Interestingly enough, Whorf’s view resembles Wittgenstein’s notion on the role of language and its effects on habitual thinking (as has been noted by for instance Ellis 1993: 60–1 and Shotter 1993: 99–117). Language does not only offer some habitual routes that are easy to follow, but in doing so may also hinder us in seeing reality in a non-habitual way.

To summarize, Whorf suggested that as linguistic beings humans are born into a community that has its established language use, its rhetoric, or its discursive practices. Through this, humans are afforded a linguistic/cultural perspective: some categories of perception and analysis present themselves in a more ‘ready-made’ form to children. And because the rules of the language games typical to each community have to be agreed with – in order to ensure the possibility of communication – it is unthinkable that the expressions and categories that particular ways of speaking afford us should not at all influence our own practices. Thus it is the very social nature of the language – the fact that we cannot use a radically individual private language, but have to agree upon word
usages and grammatical means – that makes us subscribe to a similar (but not identical) perspective.

Reading Whorf himself instead of his interpreters also makes it obvious that he does not fit into the role of a naive relativist. He both recognises the commonalities between languages and cultures and sees that their variation cannot occur in a random or unconstrained fashion. In fact, his view of how particular and universal are related seems to be similar to Bakhtin’s: although they both stress the theoretical importance of variation, they do not deny the commonality and continuity in language and cognizing.

Diversity of dialogues: Bakhtinian comments

Although Bakhtin has sometimes been represented as a lonely giant of thought, in recent research his debt to German philosophy has been demonstrated in a most convincing manner (see for instance Brandist 1997, 2000). It now seems evident that especially the neo-Kantian thought of the Marburg School, and figures such as Max Scheler and Ernst Cassirer exerted a notable influence on him (see Lähteenmäki 2002). This influence also links Bakhtin to Whorf. Another similarity is in their reception: Bakhtin and Whorf have been – unjustly – ignored within linguistics for very similar reasons. Their axioms about the nature of language were alien to mainstream linguistics and they were not seriously considered. In Bakhtin’s case, the quarrel with the structuralist-Chomskyan tradition is old: it can be read already in Voloshinov’s (1973) critique of Saussure.

Although the similarity between Bakhtin and Whorf has been noted (see for instance Clark and Holquist 1984: 293; Schultz 1990), it has not been explored in any detail. One of the common features in their thinking is the idea that the observer’s perspective molds the observation. Thus, among the things that Bakhtin seems to share with Whorf is the view on how the particular point of observation necessarily molds and affects our thinking.

It is well known that Bakhtin stresses the situatedness of being, the fact that we are tied to our specific position in time and space and thus, in a sense, also to an individual perspective that cannot be fully shared by another person. At first, this would seem an even more relativist view than Whorf’s. But what is central for the present discussion is that Bakhtin stresses that the individual (consciousness) is at the same time bound to its environment. Thus the role of the other is of utmost importance in the formation of our individual consciousness, and the
antithetical opposition between social and individual diminishes (see also Lähteenmäki 1994; Marková 2000). It is precisely by having an opportunity to complement our individual perspective in a dialogue with another, that it becomes possible to see wholes instead of fragmented and separate individual realities. As Gardiner (1998: 135) puts it, it is this encounter with the other that helps us avoid the danger of solipsism possibly lurking in the idea of perspectivity of experience.

It is, however, clear that Bakhtin’s view is not identical with Whorf’s. There are interesting differences in emphasis and focus. When Bakhtin speaks of language, he does not refer to diversity found in different languages but to diversity found within one (national) language. As Bakhtin (1986: 60) argues, language is full of diversity and can be seen in terms of heteroglossia. Heteroglossia reflects the ideologies present, or the points of view held in the linguistic community. Thus it has to be noted that the language that participates in our thinking patterns (if we accept Whorf’s thesis) is not a unitary entity, a monolithic national language, but rather consists of, or is, a plurality of discursive practices.

Summarizing a Whorfian-Bakhtinian view on language and thinking, it is obvious that both see cognizing as tied to the subject’s own position in time and space. As cognizers and language users human beings are conditioned by particular features provided for them by their environment. This also makes diversity theoretically central. What needs to be repeated, however, is that the Whorfian-Bakhtinian theoretical emphasis on the particular does not imply a denial of commonalities between men or the common features of the world we live in. This they both clearly point out. As we have already seen, for Whorf all perception was governed by its basically universal laws, and Bakhtin, in his turn, mentions the ‘common logic’, which he views as lying beyond the different semiotic systems.

It is – I think – highly significant how Bakhtin formulates his point when he says that that the similarity between human languages lies in the element of repeatability, or, regeneration (1986: 106–7). Contrary to the Chomskyan and cognitivist view, Bakhtin does not see universal elements as innately endowed structures, but as something event-like and cyclical in nature. The shared elements emerge in the process of everyday linguistic and cultural behaviours. Linguistic and cultural practices are constantly repeated, in contemporary daily life but also from one generation to another. In this endlessly on-going process, practices and patterns of behaviour are constantly liable to changes, but also necessarily repeat features of practices that occur elsewhere in time or space. The processual nature of being refers to a basic dynamicity present in
both language and thinking. In this we find a link from Bakhtin to Merleau-Ponty, who also, according to Gardiner (1998: 141) sees the natural world as processual and non-teleological, a world of becoming.

The commonality in embodiment: add Merleau-Ponty

There is one more aspect to human cognitive experience that is present in the writings of Bakhtin and Whorf, but one that is perhaps most explicitly expressed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This is the notion of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty was first introduced to Husserlian phenomenology, but moved from it towards a phenomenology of the body. Aiming at passing the Cartesian abyss between mind and body, he tried to envisage human cognition in terms of situated embodied experience. As Merleau-Ponty (1964: 3–5) puts it, the perceiving mind is incarnated, and it is the body that is our point of view on the world. In this section, I will try to see whether we can find common features between Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty in their ideas of the body, an issue that has been touched upon by for instance Holquist (1990: xxxv), Gardiner (1998: 128) and Jung (1998).

While the contribution of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodiment to cognitive science has been recognized, Bakhtin’s notion of body has been discussed mainly elsewhere, for instance, in cultural and feminist studies. But, as Holquist (1997) argues, Bakhtin’s emphasis on the situatedness of perception can also be read as a view of seeing it as embodied. Thus, when Bakhtin talks about a unique point of location where no one else can be located, this can also be read as a reference to bodily existence. Bakhtin (1993: 47) says: ‘As a disembodied spirit, I lose my compulsive, ought-to-be relationship to the world, I lose the actuality of the world.’ It is evident, however, that neither Merleau-Ponty nor Bakhtin regards the body in a mechanistic manner as a material object, a thing, or a machine: it is an alive, or lived body they are talking about.

The notion of embodied cognition ties humans to the world. As Merleau-Ponty (1964: 3) says, he tried ‘to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world’. This view has been echoed later in approaches where mind has been as connected to its environment (see for instance Gibson 1970; Clark 1997). Thus to say that mind is incarnated, or, embodied means saying that it also has an intimate connection with the world – both with the natural world as physical environment, and with the social world in which the embodied agents interact. Holquist (1990: xxxiii) argues that Bakhtin’s notion of body may originally have been influenced by Henri Bergson. However, it is
clear that Bakhtin always highlighted the role of other, also when discussing the body. Jung (1998) remarks on the affinities between Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty and argues that Bakhtin saw both mind and society as carnal: there is an embodied mind that is involved in the society of intercorporeality.

The notion of embodiment is central for showing that the individual, linguistic or cultural diversity that makes each perspective unique does not result in an irreducibly pluralistic view. It is the embodiment of mind and the intercorporeality of society that help us explain the double nature of being: the fact that we are both unique and connected with everyone else. It also lets us avoid the view that perspectivity would result in irreversible chaos or world-views that would be deeply alien to each other. Sharing the embodiment, living in the same world and engaging in interaction with others means that world-views necessarily blend (see Gardiner 1998: 134; Merleau-Ponty 1964: 16). As Gardiner (1998: 139) points out, both Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty agree with the ultimate nature of the unique bodily perspective, but still reject the proposition that the resulting viewpoints are incommensurable. The body, as Holquist (1997: 224) puts it, is not only a unique place to be, but also ‘the one home we share in the world’s materiality’.

**Brave new science of cognition?**

Finally, all that is said above leads us to consider where the homestead of the sciences studying language and cognition really lies. It seems evident that one thing our authors shared was an interest in natural sciences, for example, biology. However, as Holquist (1997: 219) interestingly argues, Bakhtin’s involvement with biology sprang from an interest in life, living and animate objects. It was not the materialist body as a machine and the mechanical universe he was speaking about but rather, a dynamic universe of living things.

At the same time, another common feature may be found in an emphasis of the connectedness of living things. As Holquist (1997) suggests, in Bakhtin’s writings we may also see an attempt to describe something we today know as complexity. Interestingly, a similar view, perhaps even more explicit in its prediction of the later developments within complexity theory, chaos theory and non-linear mathematics may be found in Whorf (1956: 248). This is obvious in the following quote:

This view implies that what I have called patterns are basic in a really cosmic sense, and that patterns form wholes, akin to the Gestalten of
psychology, which are embraced in larger wholes in continual progression. – It is as if, looking at a wall covered with fine tracery of lacelike design, we found that this tracery served as the ground for a bolder pattern, yet still delicate, of tiny flowers, and upon becoming aware of this floral expanse we saw that multitudes of gaps in it make another pattern like scrollwork, and that groups of scrolls made letters, the letters if followed in a proper sequence made words, the words were aligned in columns which listed and classified entities, and so on in continual cross-patterning until we found this wall to be – a great book of wisdom!

How are we to read remarks like these? Would they mean that cognitive science should count among the natural sciences after all: a subdivision of biology, for example? It is true that interesting ideas – echoing points that have been made above – about the nature of cognition do come from biology, among them Uexkull's (1934/1982) theory of the organism and its environment or the autopoietic or enactivist theory of cognition by Maturana and Varela (see for instance Maturana and Varela 1980; Varela et al. 1993). But it is as true that similar issues have been raised among human sciences since Feuerbach’s philosophy and Peirce’s semiotics, to mention but a few obvious names. One might also remember that, when Bakhtin speaks of connectedness, he says that things are bound ‘with the internal unity of meaning’, something that also echoes Peirce’s notion of semiosis. It is in this intrinsic meaningfulness, in the process of signification where the future of cognitive research lies, if one is allowed to make a guess. The familiar Bakhtinian dialogue can then be read as one metaphor for this highly complex and meaningful patterning that is typical to the processes in which humans interact with their world, or, are connected with it.

**Philosophies and methodologies – concluding remarks**

To return to the methodologies of science, Bakhtin, Whorf and Merleau-Ponty all stress the fact that also scientific inquiry is time and space bound. First, it is bound to the embodied individual perspective, as Merleau-Ponty (1970: 7) notes: ‘All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge is gained from my own, particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless.’ Second, Whorf reminds us that science is also bound to the perspective afforded by one’s language and culture. The scientific discourse that has developed in a certain historical and cultural context has features that are particular to it: ‘What we call
“scientific thought” is a specialization of the western Indo-European type of language, which has developed not only a set of different dialectics, but actually a set of different dialects’ (Whorf 1956: 246).

Because of the perspectivity that is always present in argumentation, it is clear that the researcher is not an outside objective observer. This is also pointed out by Bakhtin (1986: 126): the observer has no position outside of what he observes. Perspectivity does not suggest, however, that all observations are equally valid, if they are to pass as scientific. The three authors speak on this point in terms that are strikingly similar. Whorf (1956: 232), for example, speaks of future linguistics being among ‘other exact sciences’. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1970: 7) sees that it is human experience – how space, time and world are ‘lived’ – that needs to be studied but that it needs to be done as ‘rigorous science’. This is an important remark, suggesting a need to transcend the debate between hermeneutics and positivism.

Also, Bakhtin’s project is described by Holquist (1997) as a search for ‘beautiful science’. Thus, Bakhtinian dialogue can be seen even as a form of experimentation (see Faber, Chapter 9, this volume). Everyday experimentation and scientific practices differ in quantity only, not in quality. Being in the world is fundamentally a process of asking questions, a process which in Academia is done more rigorously and intensively than in other spheres of life. Although – to echo the famous Bakhtinian phrase – we do not necessarily receive the ultimate answers – we do and we must approach truth by putting forth constantly new questions. And tied as we are to our particular points of view, we still aim at more comprehensive vistas: although ‘we can know the world only from a unique situation in it ... we are compelled by the nature of life to generalize our local knowledge’ (Holquist 1997: 228).

To summarize, I do not suggest that the writings of Bakhtin, Whorf and Merleau-Ponty represent a unitary world-view. What I do suggest, is that they had similarities in their intellectual influences, that they had a similar philosophy of life and that they saw the future of the human sciences in strikingly similar terms. In many cases their ideas were not fully developed, but instead, tentatively formulated and sketchy. Both Whorf and Merleau-Ponty died at a relatively early age and Bakhtin was far from being a celebrated academic figure during his lifetime. But although different in their argumentation and focus, all three can be seen among forerunners of the ‘beautiful and rigorous science’ of human dynamics that may be emerging and in which human experience and its observation are combined with rigorous ways to analyse its different manifestations. I can do no better than end up with a quote from Merleau-Ponty (1970: viii) which
summarizes the argument in no uncertain terms: ‘The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression.’

Notes

1. A collection of Dan Alford’s papers is available at http://www.sunflower.com/~dewatson/
2. In Whorf’s choice of terms, the influence of Gestalt psychology, for instance Kurt Koffka, or Wolfgang Köhler, is obvious.

References


Introduction

What does dialogism have to offer to the study of writing as ‘practice’? In this chapter, I shall try to illustrate my navigation in relation to this complex issue from the empirical and epistemological point of view of the applied linguist. More specifically, I work as a writing researcher trying to understand what happens when children and teenagers appropriate a highly literate culture. How can an applied linguist come to view dialogism as a basic prerequisite for understanding and stimulating the development of cultural appropriation? And how does all of this relate to the underlying theme of this book – theory of culture – as applied to a different cultural practice like, for instance, jazz improvisation?

In the first section of my chapter, I shall focus on educational and non-educational written communication taken from children’s and teenagers’ writing. In this section I shall try to demonstrate how studies of developmental writing imply a call for a dimension of interaction in writing research (cf. Bakhtin’s 1986 notion of utterance). In the second section, I shall try to demonstrate how such a social interactionist (simple dyadic) understanding of written communication fails to account for important contextual and cultural dimensions involved. This failure has led a number of my writing research colleagues to opt for an alternative, social constructionist understanding of writing. In the third section, I shall try to demonstrate how the Bakhtinian notion of ‘double dialogue’ is a genuine synthesis that transcends the traditional dichotomy between interactionism and constructionism as formulated by Nystrand et al. (1993). In a concluding section I shall explore some of the implications of a dialogical position for theory of culture, focusing on the concept of cultural practice.
The need for social interactionism

When small children learn to write *outside of* educational contexts, as they frequently do (see Kress 1997), they typically have a genuinely interested, local audience. When an early writer in my material, ‘Siri’, was six, she spent a weekend with her parents and younger brother at her grandparents’ house. On this occasion one central member of the family was missing, her uncle – who often used to play with her after Sunday brunch. This time he was far away, however, studying the guitar in the U.S. So, on this Sunday morning she wrote him a beautifully decorated, long letter (see Figure 7.1).¹

This letter is a genuinely communicative utterance, within a sequence of earlier genuine utterances, and the text is infused with reciprocity throughout (Rommetveit 1974), including music as a shared interest and the representation of a much younger brother (‘Markus’), who cannot yet write. The letter is also an example of a child conquering a social status for herself in relation to an adult ‘significant other’ (Mead 1934).

Contrast this discourse with the following one, taken from educational teenager writing. In this setting, a seventh grade pupil (age 14) has received out-of-class special education lessons for his dyslexia, and proudly returns to his ordinary class teacher with the following draft, written entirely on his own initiative [again author’s translation, LSE] (see Figure 7.2).

```
TO ‘TERY’
I MIS U
HOPE U COM
HOM FOR KRISMAS HOLIDAI
TEN WE SHAL CUDL WIT U
AN BY PRESENT FOR U
TANKS FOR TE CARDS I GOT
HOPE U ARE DOIG WEL IN TE CONTRY
U AR IN. I GESS U AR IN AMERICA. U
AR CLOSTO AFRICA.
DO U PLAI NICE ON UR GITAR.
I PLAIDAT CONCERT
[LAST] MONDAI THAT WAS.
TOMORO I SHAL [GO] TO GOSPEL KOIR
AN ‘MARKUS’ LOVSU. I THIK THAT
HE MISES U HETO. TODAI TO I THIK
HARTILI GRETIGS FROM SIRIAN MARKUS
MANY CUDL AN HUGS
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Figure 7.1 Written interaction between child and adult [author’s translation, LSE]
Lasse and Ronny
There once was a boy whose name was Lasse. His father was named Ronny. This happened one summer at the cottage. Both walked to the sea to take a dive. Their dog Brutus was loping along. Suddenly something grey leapt out of the water ...

Figure 7.2 From a dyslexic’s first draft

Lasse and Ronny
There once was a boy whose name was Lasse. His father was named Ronny. This happened one summer by the coast at the cottage. The cottage has four bedrooms and a kitchen and a small parlour. The cottage is located close to Tvedestrand at the south coast. Both went to the sea, while they were walking down to the sea they were thinking that it will be nice with a dive. Their dog Brutus was loping along. The breed of Brutus is Bovier des Flandres which is a Belgian cattle dog ...

Figure 7.3 From a dyslexic’s second draft

His teacher is not sure how to respond, so he brings the draft to my in-service training group of colleagues, who jointly produce premises for a written response. The pupil is then asked to rewrite his draft. The response that was given may relatively easily be deduced from the pupil’s second version (see Figure 7.3). This sample discourse is strange indeed (see Evensen 2000 for an analysis of its strangeness), but even in this strange context we find response, and utterances-responding-to-responses-to-utterances. And even here there is a remnant element of a writer’s auto-poiesis (the competent dyslectic), even if the responders seem to disregard totally this important aspect. In both cases, furthermore, we have a situated writer
who is negotiating meaning with one or more situated readers through
the symbolic resource of written language. Such dyadic negotiation of
meaning between specific, differently situated writers and readers is at
the heart of micro-social, interactionist theories of written communica-
tion, as captured in the following model, developed on the basis of
Nystrand (1986) (see Figure 7.4).

Within a social interactionist framework, written discourse is seen lit-
terally as the symbolic meeting place between a situated writer and one
or more situated readers (Nystrand 1986). Hence the upper set of arrows
in the model simultaneously captures textual aspects and aspects of
the immediate social environment. Meaning emerges within this kind
of framework as the result of dyadic negotiation within contextual
diversity.

Written interaction also affects specific writers and readers in a second
way. During the writing process, the writer is influenced by both the
emerging text and by the mental processes accompanying it. Similarly,
reflection-while-reading may deeply affect the reader. My version of the
social-interactionist framework (with a lower set of arrows) is hence
intended to reflect not only the interpersonally communicative aspects
of writing, but also the epistemological and thus auto-poetic (intra-
personal) aspects. Both kinds of aspects are regarded as social phenom-
ena within the interactionist framework (see Evensen 2002 for further
analysis).

In comparison with earlier, formalist models of written language, such
a model is a giant leap forward. With interactionism as a mental tool it
becomes possible to understand why written communication is more
than transportation of messages from ‘Sender’ to ‘Receiver’. It also
becomes possible to see the relationship between social interaction and
auto-poiesis. It even becomes possible to specify positive factors for
children’s writing development, as well as negative factors in formalist
teaching traditions. Consequently, my adoption of social interactionism
during the late 1980s was experienced as a liberating move in my career
as an educationally oriented writing researcher. But my sense of ease was
soon to wane.

![Figure 7.4 A socio-interactionist model of written communication](image-url)
The need for socio-cultural history in writing research

Let me switch to a different educational setting. Within the framework of a seventh grade project (Evensen 2000, 2001), three classes of students at three different schools are learning to argue on paper. Based on a number of eliciting statements like ‘God, it ticks me off when...’ or ‘And that’s final!’, the weak performer ‘Kari’ has produced a draft about her favourite, although rare, musical instrument (one called torader in Norwegian) and brought it to a small group of fellow pupils for peer response. After the response session, she sits down to rewrite. She starts by mechanically copying from her first draft [my translation, errors included, LSE] (see Figure 7.5).

She then blots out this embryonic paragraph, writes DRAFT in capital letters and starts with a new paragraph (see Figure 7.6).

In her writing process, Kari is negotiating meaning through discourse with her peers in a response group (Nystrand 1986). In this negotiation, Kari needs to make what has so far been unilaterally known mutually known. Her way of elaborating the unilaterally known is through a definition. We can easily see that her definition comes as a result of communicative pressure with her peers there and then; her peers in the response group have asked her about the meaning of the unfamiliar term ‘torader’. We may also note that she places her definition discourse-initially, where it will be needed in this immediate communication context with peers who, she realizes, do not know what she is

THE TORADER
I love playing the torader because
it exciting, interesting and <it is> not to forget

Figure 7.5 A mechanical approach to rewriting

DRAFT
THE TORADER
A torader is a kind of accordion,
just a bit smaller an it has just two
rows you can play on.
I love to that instrument because
it is exciting, interesting and not to forget
inspirin.

Figure 7.6 A reciprocal approach to rewriting
talking about. The definition hence occurs in a discourse position that is highly unlikely within the genre at hand, argumentative prose.

Given the teaching traditions of Norwegian primary schools, it is not likely that Kari has yet come across definitions as subject matter to be learnt, and she certainly has not come across it so far in her lower secondary programme. Still, I would claim, her definition does not, somehow, appear out of the blue. Growing up in a literate culture, she is bound to have come across definitions even if she has not formally learnt them in school. She consequently negotiates meaning with her peers with a relevant aspect of literate culture ‘ringing at the back of her mind’ (cf. Bakhtin 1986) as a possibility that she opts for, based on her own immediate communicative needs.

An interactionist model beautifully captures the reciprocal aspects of such a writing process. Still, there are essential aspects of it that an interactionist model simply can not account for, unless the semiotic system were to be created anew each time people communicate: Her definition, we have observed, does not come entirely out of the blue. Furthermore, how can we account for the fact that all of us immediately recognize Siri’s letter as a ‘letter’ and Kari’s definition as a ‘definition’, that is both discourses as belonging to a class of genres or communicative acts, as something resulting from some form of typification (Schütz and Luckmann 1973/89)?

Observations and questions like these have led researchers in applied linguistics to opt for macro-social, constructionist models (cf. Nystrand et al. 1993). In such group-oriented models, discourse is seen as a stabilizing force mediating between, on the one hand, communities on different levels of social organization – levels that earlier research terms language communities (Hymes 1974), discourse communities (Swales 1990) and communities of practice (Brown and Duguid 1991) – and on the other hand, such groups’ social activities, joint purposes and norms of verbal conduct. According to constructionist theories, discourse occurs at a socio-cultural point of intersection where communicative convention emerges as a result of the interplay between social groups, their organization, their purposes and their symbolic resources. Thus, according to Swales (1990), genre may best be understood as the emerging answer to the recurring purposes of specific ‘discourse communities’. Such theories may be presented visually as in Figure 7.7.

A social constructionist dimension brings attention to the interplay between relatively stable social organization and relatively stable semiotic resources for communication. Large-scale and historically quite stable cultural communities develop ‘languages’, as well as the variation
that is typical within languages, to stimulate and regulate their communicative interaction (Hymes 1974; Bakhtin 1986). Medium-scale, and somewhat less stable ‘discourse communities’ similarly develop genres within languages according to their recurrent communicative purposes or tasks (Miller 1984; Bazerman 1988; Swales 1990). Small-scale, informal communities of everyday practice, like families, friends or workmates, are social sites of ongoing communicative innovation (cf. Brown and Duguid 1991; Evensen 2001).

Common across such social groupings are symbolic discourse functions (such as comparisons, contrasts, foregrounding–backgrounding etc.) that tend to appear across contexts. It is along this dimension that we will find the semiotic resources that have been sedimented over time as languages and (relatively stable) genres. To avoid confusion regarding the now blurred status of the term ‘discourse’, I choose to follow a convention initiated by Gee (1990), using lower-case initial d in ‘discourse’ only when discussing immediate interaction and upper-case D (that is ‘Discourse’) when discussing somewhat more stable group practices or discursive convention.

In the graphic model above, levels of social organization are drawn to the left, and corresponding symbolic resources are drawn to the right. This analytical opposition is meant to bring out the traditional idea that convention develops within social organization and thus also reflects it (see Miller 1994 for discussion). Simultaneously, there is a vertically
drawn interplay between an upper system dimension and a lower action and activity dimension. On the social left-hand side of the model, this vertical interplay operates between group constructions (levels of organization) and their recurrent actions, activities and purposes (Miller 1984, 1994; Engeström 1987; Swales 1990). On the symbolic right-hand side, a similar interplay operates between relatively stable symbolic organization drawn on the upper side and more specific, yet recurrent discourse functions drawn on the lower side.

Conventional resources are thus partially different and partially shared. Most written communication takes place, for instance, within the heteroglossia of a shared language. Shared across discourse social groupings are also discourse functions (such as comparisons, contrast orforegrounding-backgrounding) that tend to appear across immediate contexts (Evensen 2002). Similarly, the vertical axis addresses difference. Different levels of social organization have different affordances and sociocultural agendas. In some case they may even have opposing interests and positions within some power structure. Because signs and sign systems carry their sociocultural history along as ‘coloured shades of meaning’ (cf. Bakhtin 1981b on ‘heteroglossia’), signs and sign systems have variability built into both their conventional meaning and use. It follows that variability, and hence tension, is a central aspect of discourse even in constructionist approaches (cf. Miller 1984: 74).

Several important aspects of written discourse are brought out by such a vertical model. It demonstrates that not only does communication require the interaction of specific participants; it also requires access to communicative resources that need not be invented in toto every time specific persons communicate. The vertical axis thus solves one fundamental problem with narrowly interactionist approaches, by specifying what these resources are.

A constructionist approach may explain the relationship between large socio-cultural groupings and the relative stability of languages. At the other end of a scale of social organization, it may also explain the relationship between small communities of practice (Brown and Duguid 1991) and verbal innovation (see Evensen 2001 for examples). In my empirical context, it may even explain how typified discourse phenomena such as definitions may suddenly start appearing in school without having ever been taught.

To me, however, the constructionist turn in writing research, as well as my own growing need to account for underlying cultural resources for discourse, created an ethical challenge. In educational contexts, at least in Norway, the relative stability of ‘language’ and ‘genre’ is an
ever-returning excuse for re-implementing formalist approaches to teaching, often under the dubious heading ‘new’ (cf. ‘new genre approaches’, ‘new rhetoric’ etc.). So, simply adopting a constructionist approach would implicitly equal inviting a return to old educational practices under the disguise of educational innovation.

The notion of ‘double dialogue’ as synthesis

In order to meet this challenge, I felt a need to start looking for axiologically reflexive approaches to language and verbal communication (cf. Bakhtin 1990). In the dialogical relation between an utterance's addressivity and response-ibility I found an axiological potential that Bakhtin brings out. On this basis I experienced the need to carry out a major reconceptualization of language, where language in my work came to be seen not as abstract form (cf. Voloshinov’s 1973 criticism of ‘abstract objectivism’), but as ‘sedimented social acts in which communication took place’ (Schütz and Luckmann 1989: 153). Language is not a matter of biology or abstract form as much as it is a matter of immediate, but recurring human needs and obligations actualized by constantly recurring aspects of communicative situations. Because of their recurring nature, these aspects lead to sedimentation, and sedimentation processes will result in relatively stable semiotic resources. But if this is what is going on when convention is created, our view of what ‘language’ is has to be radically different from the view of abstract objectivism (cf. Linell 1998, Chapter 5, this volume).

Speaking with Linell (pers. comm. 1998) a specific dialogue does itself ‘enter a dialogue’ – with earlier and ensuing dialogues. Siri’s letter is in dialogue with both cards received previously from her uncle and her own previous extended oral communication with him. Kari’s discourse-initial definition is in dialogue with the earlier discussion in her response group, and the text instigates a series of texts, making ‘Kari the loser’ eventually become ‘Kari the winner’ (reported in Evensen 2002).

Through its specific relations to other dialogues, each dialogue is also in dialogue with cultural, social and semiotic systems of some sort. Without such a socio-historical dialogue, we cannot account for the similarity between Siri’s letter and other letters, or between Kari’s definition and other definitions. We cannot even account for the existence of the terms ‘letter’ and ‘definition’ themselves.

What follows from observations like these, is that dialogue is a multiple phenomenon, as Linell’s term ‘double dialogue’ implies. There is a dialogue going on between each specific writer and each equally specific reader, as social interactionism highlights. This foregrounded dialogue,
however, does not exclude other, backgrounded dialogues going on simultaneously – dialogues between the ongoing dialogue and earlier dialogues (for instance inter-textuality) and dialogues with the sedimented symbolic resources available for discourse. Simple interactionism hence needs to be transcended.

There also are cultural conventions that are relevant whenever we communicate, as social constructionism highlights. But these conventions are not something fixed that we use, as the common misnomer ‘language use’ implies. Conventions are not straightjackets in everyday cultural life. They were gradually created by ‘us’, and are there for ‘us’. Whenever need arises, we may cross the borders of convention, and innovation may take place (see Evensen, 2001).

Recognizing a socio-historical cultural dimension in dialogism does hence not imply adopting a constructionist stance to written communication; it transcends it. Central to the notion of ‘double dialogue’ is Bakhtin’s emphasis on the co-constitutive nature of the relation between discourse dimensions. Introducing the term ‘chronotope’, he states (1981a: 84): ‘We will give the name chronotope to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.’ In specifying his perspective on this term, he states (loc. cit.): ‘What counts for us is the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)’ and goes on to specify this position in a way that has been crucial to the graphic formulation of my model below (Figure 7.8): ‘This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterises the artistic chronotope.’ One dimension should hence always be interpreted with an eye to the other, thus implying a truly integrated model.

It is this fused interconnectedness that I try to capture with the term ‘diatope’ in this dialogical model: Meaning normally emerges as one integrated phenomenon. Within such a framework, immediate interaction will need to be interpreted also through the lens of more stable resources for meaning making. Hence what appears in immediate discourse, here and now, is not taken strictly out of the blue. We simply do not invent anew all our resources for meaning each time we interact. Similarly, the stability implied by the social-constructionist dimension should be interpreted also through the lens of immediate interaction. Languages, genres and cultural competencies emerge within this perspective not as static objects, but as dynamic and flexible resources that gradually develop and change as they keep being used.

Thus, if we refer to Bazerman’s well-known (1988) history of the experimental scientific article, as this genre developed around Isaac
Newton as a focal researcher, we can clearly see how specific interactions between Newton, a moderator and opposing fellow scientists created a new genre that over a long period of time was sedimented into what we today know as the experimental research article, with its conventional Introduction – Methods – Results – Discussion structure (Swales 1990). Hence, the genre should not be seen as a fixed, formalist given of scientific communication, but as a functional resource built on struggle and contention between opposing views, and hence amendable whenever research perspectives change.

In dialogical thinking there is a theoretical category that links utterances within a specific dialogue to other utterances even from other dialogues, and accordingly dyadic interaction to larger social and cultural patterns. This is the category that Kristeva (1980) termed ‘inter-text’. This term was not used by Bakhtin himself, but is implied by his metaphorical terms ‘refraction’ and ‘ventriloquism’ (1981b, 1984a). Whenever we utter, we ‘refract’ other utterances in such a way that elements taken from them fit the current utterance-in-context. Similarly we borrow from other utterers’ voices in such a way that we may even be said to ‘ventriloquise’; other utterers may even be seen to speak indirectly through our utterances, just like a ventriloquist speaks through some dummy.
The implication of inter-text for communication theory (and even for cultural theory) is far-reaching. It implies that our access to group-level culture or convention is always specific. There simply is no abstract Convention, Genre or Culture in the capitalized sense; there are only specific actions and utterances, in specific relations to other actions and utterances. Out of such specific relations we admittedly generalise our actions and interactions, and out of experiential necessity we form generalized notions of convention, genre and culture. But such generalized notions should not be idealized (cf. the Introduction to this volume).

The inter-text category similarly implies that actual utterances and voices are always foreground in a relation where other utterances and voices are background. The full meaning of each utterance emerges as exactly the grounding relation between this foreground and this background (Evensen 2002). The joining of axes in the diatope model is thus more than one more exercise in eclecticism; it is a qualitative move. The reciprocity between dimensions in dialogism means that the interaction axis of the diatope model is both ‘enlarged’ and further embedded, in that ‘context’ is understood not only in a situational sense but also in a wider cultural sense. The constructionist axis, on the other hand, is qualitatively transformed. It is to be understood as a constantly emerging resource pool for immediate acts and interacts. Thus, as social individuals, we may occasionally invent new words to refer to new concepts (cf. my term ‘diatope’ as a case in point); we may gradually co-create new genres to serve new and relatively stable discourse purposes; we may construct countergrammatical utterances during conversation or linguistic exposition, or we may extort fixed phrases just for the fun of it. In all of these case, however, earlier terms, genres, grammatical constructions or phrases will be available as resources to be refracted.

In this transformation of social construction, traditional theoretical concepts such as language and discourse communities become relatively open and flexible tools of social and cultural life rather than reified concepts that are thought by many teachers (or theorists) to actually determine human actions. As social beings we are indeed members of social groupings, but we are not always their victims. As human beings we move across a potentially large number of communities, and as a consequence all borders between them are slightly recontextualized, blurred and changing whenever we utter. Consequently all genres have an aspect of hybridity. Similarly the recurrent purposes of actual members of discourse communities may be attained in alternative ways, yielding a flexibility of genre that our analyses should acknowledge (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995).
Given all of this; so what?

An integrated, dialogical model may seem to solve the theoretical riddles that I have been pondering over since the late 1980s, but exactly how is all of this relevant to a theory of culture? An easy part of the answer lies in pointing out that written culture is in itself an important part of culture, and an important creator of culture. Reading and writing are extremely slow processes, and this *lento, rubato* rhythm of written communication invites both ‘re-flection’ and ‘co-flection’. Thus, even educational writing is a major cultural arena, an arena that is central in terms of identity development. Learning to write implies more than learning a skill; it also implies finding tools for expressing your identity – and using those tools helps (reflexively) in creating that identity. Even in terms of sheer volume, educational writing is a central cultural arena; in fact it is one among the main text producing agencies in any modern country. Hence educational writing is a relevant testing ground for theories of culture.

An interactionist model, we have seen, clearly brings out the auto-poetic aspects of the developmental processes involved in educational writing, but not equally well their conventional aspects. A constructionist model, on the other hand, brings out conventional aspects of developmental processes in educational writing, but not equally well their auto-poetic aspects. A dialogical model, as I have tried to show, brings out both the auto-poetic and the conventional aspects of these processes, while at the same time making the relationship between these aspects apparent. This observation at least yields considerable face validity to pursuing a dialogical approach to written culture. In its openness to contestation and innovation it also leaves the axiologically worried writing teacher (or writing researcher) educational room for students to conquer.

The potential of such an approach does not stop here, however. It may shed light on both old and new issues in theory of culture. An old issue regards cultural ‘constants’ central in poetry and other forms of literature. How can such ‘constants’ be discussed without falling into the trap of essentialism? How can constants be rejected without falling into the trap of pure relativism? There *are* in fact constant elements in what has been known as ‘the human condition’ – universal phenomena like birth, development, initiation, love, hatred, joy, despair and death are real in one sense. We do not, however, access these phenomena as constants, as traditionist (or constructionist) approaches would imply (see above on capitalized notions of convention, genre and culture). We only experience
specific births or deaths, in actual life. Our specific experiences, however, are not truly meaningful until somehow shared. This is where a relation-ist approach like dialogism (and not a traditionalist or relativist one) sheds light on the discussion. We can only experience specifics, but through interaction we gain access to similar specifics of others (cf. Dufva, Chapter 6, this volume). Through interaction we also enter moral relationships of address-ivity and respons-ibility (Bakhtin 1993). This is a point where dialogism differs radically from both sophism and postmodernism.

On a dialogical basis our utterances join intersubjective threads of discourse concerning similar experiences; they even join threads that are eventually larger than either individual life, a social group or a local culture. Our experience is always foreground in such interaction, as we have seen, but an experiential foreground makes little sense without such sociocultural background. We are thus never cut off from the larger context in the sense that strict relativism presupposes.

In recent cultural theory the issue of cultural ‘practice’ is a central issue, and one of the core issues studied within The Gaze project (Gundersen 1999), of which my above study was a part. The notion of practice has first transformed a singular noun reading of ‘culture’ into a plural noun reading (different practices interpreted as an indicator of different ‘cultures’ within any culture; cf. Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia) and then into a gerund or present continuous verb (practices viewed as culturing or doing culture). The basic theoretical question of ‘practice’ is, however, far more than a philological one of terminologi-cal elegance: How should cultural practice be understood?

Traditionally, theories of culture have seen practice as simply a new term for tradition. A new version of this approach involves interpreting practice as a constructionist phenomenon. In applied linguistics, Norman Fairclough (1992) may represent this epi-reinterpretation. In writing research, Barton (1994), Candlin and Plum (1999) Lea and Street (1999) and may possibly represent it.3

Interactionist theories alone, however, cannot throw much new light on practice, apart from pointing out the important auto-poetic dimen-sion of cultural interacting, but a dialogical approach can. In the fused intersection between the axes of a double dialogue model lies the potential for a qualitatively new perspective. A dialogical model invites a perspective where ‘practice’ may emerge as a phenomenon to be defined within the ‘diatope’ and not within what Gee (1990) terms ‘Discourse’, that is the constructionist dimension.

One implication of a diatopal theoretical orientation is that immedi-ate culturing (doing culture here and now/there and then) should be
seen relationally, as interactional foreground in relation to tradition as constructional background. The cultural meaning of any cultural event seen as practice will then appear as the grounding relation between this particular foreground and this particular background; that is the cultural meaning of practice will appear as a relation, as a specific perspective on any cultural event (Evensen 2002).

A related implication of dialogism is to focus more on the dynamic, developmental aspects of practice. While a traditional reading implies a reification of cultural practice, a diatopal reading implies viewing practice as a developmental continuum – in ‘cultural time’, where practice is always an emergent phenomenon (cf. Lähtenmääki, Chapter 4, this volume). Talking about genres, Gunther Kress (pers. comm. 1995) has captured such an alternative approach with his metaphorical term ‘viscosity’. Practices, like genres, are ‘viscose’ processes, but their relative stability does not imply that these processes are ‘things’. The contemporary Russian Bakhtin scholar Vladimir Bibler seems to speak to this distinction with his remark that ‘Bakhtinian speech genres’ emerge and undergo changes in connection with the changes in the character of those basic, culturally significant units which we may call small clusters of communication [malye gruppy obshcheniia]’ (Alexandrow and Struchkov 1993: 350).

Similarly, while a traditional reading implies a normative stance towards cultural practice (where ‘established’ = ‘good’), a diatopal reading implies a more open, descriptive stance (cf. Bakhtin (1984b) on laughter as an epistemological strategy in medieval carnival culture). Practice is both a site of negotiation (including struggle and contestation) and a result of such negotiation. This openness leaves room for pupils or students (and others in cultural underdog positions) to both test and contest practices.

In an earlier article (Evensen 1999), I have tried to demonstrate how this diatopal approach may be turned into a useful analytical tool also for non-verbal culture, analysing a jazz improvisation event that I took part in with a fellow performer (a professional musician who did not at the time of performing know what was going to be played). My metaphorically phrased theoretical question to be tested by this analysis was: ‘Is the improvisational practice of jazz located as specific “discourse” in the factual, situated interaction, in the improvisational here and now ...? Or does the improvisational practice of jazz lie as abstracted “Discourse” (Gee 1990) along the constructional axis, in its cultural historical rooting? Or is it in the meeting point of the two axes that practice is to be found?’ (Evensen 1999: 238).

These empirical questions demonstrate a further theoretical contribution dialogism can make to the theory of culture. It may be used to
deconstruct three different readings of the term ‘practice’ itself – an interactionist reading, a constructionist reading and a dialogical reading. In my jazz improvisation study, the interactionist dimension was used in the analysis to specify how the process of improvising was managed there and then as an ongoing, reciprocal (communicative) project between the two musicians involved (including the emerging role of their mutual eye contact). The constructionist dimension was used to bring out the considerable ‘safety net’ available to both participants, even when they did not know what was going to happen. The diatopal reading was used to demonstrate how their interaction there and then was related to very specific inter-textual cultural references; while these references similarly were given their actual, then current meaning only through what went on in the musicians’ mutual interaction there and then. The merged, diatopal perspective was also used to demonstrate that a traditional reading of practice could in no specific way be used to predict the actually occurring cultural event beyond very general expectation.

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Notes

1. Her writing at the time was phonographic. The English rendition (errors included) is mine.
2. In an earlier article (Evensen 1997) I made a distinction between a that level of interpretive categories and a how level of actual experience. A how level is always what we immediately experience in local contexts; a that level is a generalized interpretive category that we use to make social and cultural sense out of individual experience.
3. All of these, it should be pointed out, recognize the central role of immediate social interaction. They do not, however, link the term ‘practice’ to this aspect of written communication.

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Part III

New Technology and Visual Art
Dialogue in Electronic Public Space: the Semiotics of Time, Space and the Internet

Finn Bostad

Introduction

Michael Bakhtin lived and wrote in a world that in many ways was quite different from the Western World of the early 21st century. Apart from the political and economic climate, his was a culture of other dominant technologies and forms of representation and communication. The printing press technology and the forms of printed matter completely controlled the social and academic scene of his time and culture. With the growth of electronic and computer technologies this has changed in parts of the world, and television, the computer, the Internet and the mobile phone have produced other supplementing forms of representation and communication (Bolter and Grushin 1999). However, this should not be over-dramatized, as this technological evolution is still strongly experienced only in the main economic and urban centres of the world (Castells 2001). At this time in history it is important to point out this fact when introducing the technological aspect referred to above, in order to avoid falling into the traps of ethnocentricity and even technological determinism when discussing the role of media technologies as agents in our culture.

To study and apply the thoughts of Bakhtin so many years after he worked and wrote, and in the new technological context is inevitably to go beyond Bakhtin, as times and spaces have changed. But in other ways his thoughts are strikingly relevant and still contributing to a growing awareness of the complexity of human representation and communication. He himself illustrated clearly that what he found in his studies in the field of literature would also apply to other fields of study, as his project was as much and even more a philosophical one as one of literary research.
To Bakhtin, the study of literature was a study of one cultural phenomenon amongst others, and he often hints at wider applications, for example as early as in his writings from the 1920s when he writes about ‘... the concrete systematicness of every cultural phenomenon, of every individual cultural act, about its autonomous participation or its participative autonomy’ (Bakhtin 1990: 274, author italics).

This general cultural orientation is discussed by Makhlin when he refers to a social ontology of participation where ‘[a]ll “active understanding” is participation. To participate means to act responsibly outside one’s own specificity as subject, …’ and that ‘... any creative act (…) is essentially participative, and not completely autonomous’ (Makhlin 1997: 47, original emphasis). Bakhtin contrasts this dialogic world-view of participative autonomy with a thoroughly monologic world-view of non-participative autonomy where genuine dialogue is impossible (Bakhtin 1984: 79–85).

Makhlin claims that Bakhtin’s contribution to a social ontology is part of a common philosophical project of the 20th century, from Husserl to Buber. But it is as interesting to place him in a more substantial German academic tradition going back to Hamann, Herder and von Humboldt. Taylor refers to their work as ‘the triple-H theory’ when he argues that they are early contributors to an alternative conception of social meaning-making (Taylor 1985: 255–92). Essential to such a conception are the Humboldtian thesis of the primacy of activity, and these persons’ understanding of the aspects of language activity where one aspect is that language ‘... serves to place some matter out in the open between interlocutors. … language enables us to put things in public space’ (ibid.: 259). This public space which language creates, is a common position or vantage point from which people may experience and communicate about the world together. In this public space people are, according to Taylor, brought together as participants with a common articulated focus. This idea of participation through language in public space is clearly the essential aspect also of Bakhtin’s later dialogic world-view.

My concern here is how this public space, where the participative autonomy is acted out, changes in time as an arena of cultural activity. The dominant technologies and forms of representation and communication change as well as tools, environments, social practices and cultures of communication and dialogue. Bakhtin wrote about the time-space or the chronotope of earlier historical periods and mentions the Agora of classical Athens and the parlours and boulevards of 19th century Paris as arenas of oral and written discourse. In the following I shall discuss aspects of the participation through language in the
I shall call electronic discourse.

Electronic discourse and dialogue

What do I mean by the term ‘electronic discourse’, and what are characteristics of the various electronic discourses we meet and are involved in as we participate in Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-based social interaction? Here communication means both communication between machines and communication between human beings. To what extent can we say that these ICT-based discourses meet the demands we put on meaningful and socially participative dialogues? The background for posing these questions is, on the one hand, the growing amount of commercial Web-based systems that, it is claimed, meet the demands for communication, collaboration and knowledge management for business as well as educational and academic institutions. On the other hand, we find that nearly all of these systems are traditional information processing systems concerned with content management, and with a tendency to utilize the ICT potential for content production and presentation without utilizing the potential for dialogue and response to the same extent. In the following, however, we shall consider some aspects of discourse and dialogue in electronic environments.

Not all discourse is dialogic, but all dialogue is discourse, as discourse is ‘language in its concrete living totality’, to use Bakhtin’s own phrase, and it is also characterised in the following way: ‘All rhetorical forms, monologic in their compositional structure, are oriented toward the listener and his answer. This orientation toward the listener is usually considered the basic constitutive feature of rhetorical discourse.

... every other sort of discourse as well is oriented toward an understanding that is ‘responsive’ – ...

(Bakhtin 1981/96: 279)

A dialogic discourse is characterized by its addressivity and responsiveness, where addressivity or reciprocity is the reciprocating presence of the other which is present in all our utterances. Solomadin puts it aptly when he writes that Bakhtin’s project for the humanities is ‘the notion of the embodiment of the Other in discourse’ (Solomadin 1997: 177). Whether these utterances are written or spoken in a traditional way or electronically mediated, the speaker and the addressee
are always interdependent. But whereas there in discourse has been a
traditional focus on the coherent utterance, dialogue focuses primarily
on response. Discourse, as part of dialogic interaction, is also double
voiced. That means it is both and at the same time a relationship
between an expression and the situation in which it is expressed, and a
relationship between an expression and the larger culture of which it is
a part (Bakhtin 1984: 181ff; Linell 1998).
Here are two recent suggestions of what constitutes a dialogue:

... a partly shared social world, established and continuously modified by (their) acts of communication. (Rommetveit 1974: 23ff)

... any dyadic or polyadic interaction between individuals who are mutually co-present to each other and who interact through language (or some other symbolic means). (Linell 1998: 9ff)

These examples focus on participation, mutuality, presence and sharing, which are the main constituents of dialogue. I shall later argue that presence, which has never been thought of as just being present here and now, that is in the same place and at the same time, may take on new forms in electronic environments afforded by the Internet. The Internet vitalizes a discussion of what it means to be co-present, and presents a potential for what we may call virtual presence through its hypermediated functionality for creating an experience of immediacy (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 21ff).

Another way of coming to grips with the concept of dialogue is to say that it may only be realized in an atmosphere characterized by a ‘continuing dialogical flow of relational, responsive activity – a flow not blocked by the continual occurrence of authoritative words’ (Bakhtin 1981: 342; Shotter 1996).

What is said above also goes for electronic discourse and dialogue, which, by the way, is not opposed to oral or written discourse and dialogue. Those are both further mediated, or to use Bolter’s term, ‘remediated’, in various technological applications which impose their constraints and affordances upon human communication.

Principles of dialogism

Any dialogical meeting is characterised by the fact that there are no neutral utterances. Discourse is always and everywhere saturated with the asymmetries of power, various types of hierarchical dominance and
economic dependence. Bakhtin expresses this in the following:

This addressee can be an immediate participant-interlocutor in an everyday dialogue, a differentiated collective of specialists in some particular area of cultural communication, a more or less differentiated public, ethnic group, contemporaries, like-minded people, opponents and enemies, a subordinate, a superior, someone who is lower, higher, familiar, foreign, and so forth. And it can also be an indefinite, unconcretised other... All these varieties and conceptions of the addressee are determined by that area of human activity and everyday life to which the given utterance is related.

(Bakhtin 1986a: 95, original emphasis)

This illustrates the triadic sign character of dialogue, as Bakhtin points to the many and varied relations between an utterance and a response, where the relations are of primary importance. In order for a dialogue to take place, there must always be some tension or asymmetry that triggers response (Linell 1998: 14), but there is also a need for dialogic conventions to ensure the development of continuity of a dialogue. Very often a dialogue exists only if the persons involved in the communication act observe and respect some rules of dialogism, and some of these main ‘rules’ or principles may be a mutual trust or reciprocity (Rommetveit 1992), a sharing of power and comprehension that gives everybody an equal opportunity to have his or her voice heard. In addition there must be a conscious effort on the part of the participants to achieve something together and actively participate in the process of negotiating meaning that a dialogue is. Negotiated meaning, or understanding, grows out of the response as ‘[u]nderstanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other’ (Bakhtin 1981: 282). It is possible to generate a long catalogue of such principles, which Linell does in his work (Linell 1998). There is also a wide range of dialogical varieties from, at the one end, a top-down monologue where one party dominates communication and leaves no room for sharing and participation, to, at the other end, a communicative event where power and dominance is more or less equally shared between the participants. In this near ideal situation there is no real centre of power, but a sharing of it. I have already pointed to the culture of participative autonomy, and the sharing of common public space. Bibler et al. also discuss the emerging role of a dialogic communication culture. They write that
‘communication within culture is not “information exchange,” nor “division of labour,” nor “participating in a joint activity” or in “mutual enjoyment.” It is co-being and mutual development of two (and many) totally different worlds – different ontologically, spiritually, mentally, physically ...’ (Bibler 1991: 298, from Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen 1998: 43).

Here is a definition of culture ‘as a form of simultaneous being and communication of people of different – past, present and future – cultures, as a form of dialogue and of bringing about these cultures' (Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen 1998: 43). Culture becomes a dialogue of different cultures, and it becomes a dialogic communication of individuals as distinct personalities where people always interact within the media or the technologies of both past and present culture.

Bibler further writes that each culture has its answer to what it means to understand oneself, other people, things, and the world. He claims that for the twentieth century ‘the cognising, investigatory reason of modernity, a form of inner microdialogue is transforming itself into a new kind of thinking – that of dialogic reason, reason of culture, where being is understood as if it were a creation of art’ (ibid: 42f; Bibler et al. 1991). This adds to the tradition of both ‘participative autonomy’ and ‘participation in public space’, and is another argument for a possible and emerging ‘social ontology of participation’.

**Space and time**

Bakhtin introduces the term *chronotope*, what he also calls ‘time space’ as a metaphor for ‘the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature’ (Bakhtin 1981: 4). He points to the fact that the term space–time is used in mathematics, and has its special meaning in relativity theory, but it is nevertheless useful as a tentative metaphor for expressing the inseparability of space and time in other areas of culture as well.

Bakhtin relates the ‘time space’ metaphor, or chronotope, to the concepts of meeting, contact, distance and proximity as he points to the meeting and parting of people as a recurrent and important theme or motif in literary plots (1981: 97ff), and he goes on to say that: ‘The motif of meeting is one of the most universal motifs, not only in literature ... but also in other areas of culture and in various spheres of public and everyday life. In the scientific and technical realm where purely conceptual thinking predominates, there are no motifs as such, but the concept of contact is equivalent in some degree to the motif of meeting.'
Again we have this insistence on the universality of his thinking, and how it affects all areas of culture where ‘the meeting’ becomes a central metaphor that is understood by way of the concepts ‘contact’, ‘distance’, and ‘proximity’. The chronotope brings together not only the temporal and the spatial, thus underlining their inseparability and simultaneity, but it includes an axiological aspect as well since it is always related to people and their choices of time and space in real events. Bakhtin illustrates this with examples from literature by pointing to the earlier mentioned examples of private and public spaces of the French parlours, the Agora and the Parisian boulevard. These were social spaces where people met and lived important parts of their private and professional lives.

Since the early 1990s the Internet has offered people in certain parts of the world a potential for creating new public and private spaces to meet, and with the possibility of both synchronous and asynchronous co-operation. The Internet now represents new places and ways to meet that are independent of and are supplemental to physical space, and the manipulation of space is accompanied by a manipulation of time. Jones argues that computer-mediated communication is a tool that makes it possible for us to use space for communication. He claims that this type of communication in essence is socially produced space, and he echoes Bakhtin when he underlines the dialectic between space and social life (Jones 1995: 16ff). To Bakhtin the time–space characterized a world that created literature, and he invites his readers to go beyond the time–space that creates the literary and reflect on how it may change the character of human contact and social communication in general (1995: 253). This reality of time–space or the chronotope is clearly expressed in the Bakhtin Circle’s concept of the sign, and the fact that meaning must always take on the form of an audible or/and visible sign, that is what he calls a ‘temporal-spatial expression’, a material embodiment of the sign without which even abstract thought is impossible (1995: 258; Voloshinov 1973: 9).

New electronic technologies of representation and communication contribute new material embodiments of the sign, or new signifiers for old signifieds. We may, for example, compare the time codes of net-based synchronous communication to those of face-to-face communication.
The latter, which is the situation we are most used to, is faster, while the former, be it Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which is based on writing, or video conferencing, is slower and in other ways a clear reduction of the one face-to-face. Being used to the face-to-face situation, with the physical presence and all its extra-linguistic and tacit repertoire, the lack of these, and also the delays even in a synchronous electronic communication may even create a slight irritation and restlessness in us (Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen 1998: 84).

Some characteristics of electronic discourse

Let us look at just a few of the characteristics of various types of electronic discourse or dialogue and reflect on its complexity. Some general characteristics are that ICT re-mediates other media, and that it represents a new potential for simultaneity, presence and distance in communication. Or in Bakhtin’s words, it represents a new potential for contact, distance and proximity. ICT increases the complexity of symbol manipulation, and at the same time this representation and communication is ubiquitous and happens at great speed. As a technology for participation and co-operation it also has great potential for response. I shall say more about this below, but first about the concept of re-mediation.

Electronic discourse re-mediates other media, that is discourses are mediated in new ways, which alters the content of the discourse, in the way that all media influence the utterances they mediate. Thus a re-mediation involves both another way of establishing contact or presence, what Bolter calls ‘immediacy’, and at the same time another way of utilising the full potential of available media in a ‘hypermediacy’ (Bolter et al. 1999). One may therefore say that oral or written discourse is re-mediated in electronic discourse. A re-mediation of our utterances creates, in a semiotic terminology, new signifiers, signs and material expressions in time and space, in our attempts to gain direct access to the object, or signified, for our experiences and our communication. Re-mediation, then, is the process of applying new signifiers in getting access to old signifieds. In this context it becomes important to discern the characteristics of these new signifiers, or signs, and identify their constraints and affordances in processes of meaning-making and communication.

Electronic discourse affords a new potential, but also places new constraints on meaning-making and learning. Chatting, for instance, can be seen to widen young people’s communicative repertoires, and to offer
great, new possibilities for communication with others, much in the same way as mobile phones and text messages of various genres from email to weblogs. Young people nowadays move within a more complex verbal and technological world where ICT also represents an aesthetic potential, since it enables experimentation with typography, language, layout, design and publication of one’s own utterances. At the same time, however, this technology also represents a loss vis-à-vis face-to-face communication and its extra-linguistic potential that we use to ensure the quality of communication in those kinds of situation. Constraints and affordances are two sides of the same coin that turn out differently with the various ICT applications in their situated use.

Because ICT causes our utterances to appear in new forms, electronic discourse, as said above, generates new objects or signifiers of interpretation, both to research, to communication in organisations and to everyday communication. Thus, we are faced with increasing complexity. Our world, with this new, electronic dimension added to it, becomes a more complex environment, or ‘semiosphere’ in Lotman’s sense of the phrase, full of new symbols, or signs (Lotman 1990). This world of signs asks much of the individual in terms of his or her competence in handling symbols, that is a person’s literacy or interpretative competence. In both business and educational institutions we are currently experiencing a change from a situation with a high degree of face-to-face activity to one in which screen-based symbol (co-)manipulation is the norm, creating heavier demands on the individual participant’s reading and writing skills.

In addition, electronic discourse is appearing in more and more arenas in society. It is becoming ubiquitous, almost like a continuing conversation, and young people’s use of text messages, e-mail, weblogs, IRC and text messaging (SMS) shows, how they for example are developing writing skills based on the frequent use of synchronous and asynchronous chat functions characterized by a swift, written exchange of brief utterances (Bolter et al. 1999: 213–19). At the same time, many young people who use IRC and SMS tend to keep several conversations going at the same time, showing a capacity for focusing and a skill which is trainable. So along with this ubiquity the negotiation of meaning on the Internet happens at great speed and with several participants at the same time.

The most important characteristic of a communicative culture where the sharing of knowledge is central, is the participative response. It is the participative response which brings about dialogue, and ICT possesses a great potential for that. But this potential will never be capable of being exploited to the full if there is no communicative culture to
acknowledge the necessity of participative response for the establishment of fruitful professional dialogues. The technology in itself does not guarantee fruitful dialogues within groups, organizations and institutions. What it takes, is mutual understanding of what constitutes the necessary components of a process of creating dialogue, and a mutual effort to launch such a process. These are what we might call cultural preconditions for meaningful use of ICT in communication, and they are among other things characterized by active participation, both in the dialogue itself and in the wish to share knowledge.

It is highly likely that the speed of information processing and transfer in the global network gives a new sensation of simultaneity and presence (and also distance) to collaboration between people in electronic discourses. The nature of the collaborative space is closely related to the type of technology used and the culture it is understood as being part of. New types of collaborative technology such as newsgroups, discussion lists, e-mail, chat rooms and weblogs relate to the categories of time and space in different ways, and the nature of this relation in turn determines the type of communication that will evolve and the types of collaborative social action we can achieve.

On the one hand, I would like to distinguish between synchronous and asynchronous communication, with chat rooms and computer conferencing as examples of the former. Here, the participants are present at the same time, but in different locations. Discussion groups and e-mail are examples of the latter, with participants neither being present at the same time nor in the same location. Another aspect of this potential is the different number and constellation of participants that are able to collaborate at any one time. Collaboration may occur between two individuals, and between single individuals and groups. E-mail is one example of a medium which enables such collaboration. The World Wide Web allows for a gradual growth of what we might call collaboration rooms, or what Taylor termed public spaces.

At one end of the scale there is a one-to-one collaboration, whereas at the other end, there is collaboration in terms of one-to-many, or in other words, mass publication. The Web's hypertext potential, that is the linking together of information into a global information network will, in addition, lead to increased intertextuality with links also between web-pages and electronic collaboration rooms. A variety of such rooms can be established, with a variety of different functions. The spatial aspect, however, is not the only prevailing aspect as regards collaboration in electronic rooms. We are also dealing with a temporal one. The relative speed of electronic collaboration may provide the participants
with a feeling of being in the same room at the same time, especially if one combines written communication with audio and video. This is a mode of collaboration which holds great potential as regards an improved sensation of immediacy and presence.

Lastly I shall mention that not only do we have a technological potential for spaces where to meet, but also there is a blurring of boundaries between private and public spaces. The use of the mobile phone brings private talks into public space as the phone no longer is stationed in the office or at home but is brought along wherever people go. Electronic mail is not just a letter addressed to one receiver; the internet based dissemination of digital writing may invite further processing and forwarding on to others. Chats are not just dialogues in private space as the conversations are being transferred from the boys’ room on to the global digital arena. This opening of dialogic space also applies to weblogs, which may have originated as the diaries and researchers’ logs on the Internet, meant for a limited audience, but with the globalization of writing with new tool for online publishing, have gone from the private to the public space.

**Same place – same time**

In Figure 8.1, we see that the different dialogue environments relate in different ways to time and place. This, in turn, has consequences for the quality of the dialogue. The face-to-face non-electronic dialogue occurs in the same place and at the same time for everyone involved. This is a good thing insofar as the quality of the given dialogue hinges on the presence of non-linguistic elements like sound, facial expression and other kinds of body language, not to mention the dialogic potential inherent in physical closeness, or proximity, *per se*. In very many situations, depending on the number of participants, this will be a desirable model of communication. ‘Presence’ is the key word for this kind of model, and we may tend to argue that the face-to-face communication is ‘the ideal paradigm of the meeting of minds’, and that it is a multimodal and complex form of behaviour characterized by phatic functions (Feenberg 1989: 22). For not only do we communicate with language, but language becomes part of a metalinguistic totality of signs. Not only do I say ‘Hey, how are you today?’, but I also say it cheerfully with a smile, adjusting the level of my voice, facing the one I am addressing, looking her in the eyes and perhaps grabbing her hand or touching her shoulder lightly in the totality of the situation which a meeting between people is. Such a face-to-face situation is very often looked upon as a
The utterance that I used in my example above, ‘Hey, how are you today?’ serves what we call a phatic function in communication. We don’t expect a long and detailed answer, it is rather a way of saying ‘I acknowledge you’ or ‘I know you and see you’ as a way of establishing identities. This is a ritual we recognize in nearly all cultures. Not only do we have such rituals or conventions in face-to-face communication events, we also have them in writing, which is an asynchronous event based on text, as in the opening and closing paragraphs in letters.

This phatic function plays a major part in establishing a common ground of communication, and aims at creating the necessary social contact between people. It represents a reciprocity and a mutual trust and even a sense of mutual belonging to some social or professional community. Phatic signs signify the fact that we are present, available, and ready to share both of our time and thoughts, and these are signs we are sending back and forth continually throughout a conversation to keep focus on the subject and keep the interest alive, and to make sure that what we say is interpreted the way we intended. We may nod our heads, give linguistic clues like ‘Yes!’, ‘Ummm!’, ‘That’s right’, look the other person in her eyes, lift a pensive finger to our lips, adjust our body posture, and take on a certain facial expression as we in fact choose,
consciously or unconsciously, from a rich palette of alternatives to reassure the other person of our attention and to enrich and colour the communication.

There are also certain conventions for closing a face-to-face conversation; the way I look at my watch or in other ways illustrate a slackening of attention, or I say ‘I’ve got to go’, ‘I’ve got another meeting in ten minutes time’, or whatever we say before we get to the concluding ritual of ‘See you later’, ‘Give my love to …’, ‘Take care’.

So phatic signs are important both at the start of a communicative event; they play important roles in keeping the communication alive, and they are felt to be necessary to ensure a polite and pleasant end which very often signals a desire to keep in touch and meet again later on. The phatic function is vital for dialogue, and it is important to realize that very many phatic signs are also tacit signs. Not only are they often expressed without words or speech, but they are understood or implied in a certain cultural setting without being stated as well, and are very often not consciously reflected upon.

Feenberg claims that ‘All such phatic signs are bypassed in computer conferencing. Even standard codes for opening and closing conversations are discarded’ (ibid.: 23). It is of course an exaggeration to say that all phatic signs are bypassed on the digital arenas of communication. We still find openings and ends, personal greetings and the equivalents of ‘How are you?’, but it is correct to say that the coming of these new arenas of communication has made us more aware of the significance of the phatic signs in dialogue (see Figure 8.1).

**Same place – other time**

If we look at the model which involves electronic services such as so-called notice-boards and most content focused web-pages on the Internet, we find that these are asynchronous in the sense that the person producing them and the reader need not be present simultaneously. Furthermore, these services do not traditionally allow for response and hence the establishment of dialogues, because they do not facilitate social interactivity between different participants in a communicative situation. Unlike, however, the face-to-face communicative situation, communication is here not tied to any physical location. It is, however, tied to a virtual ‘space’, and, in general, to only one ‘mode’ of communication, that is reading. No direct dialogue between several participants will arise. The service is tied to one place in the sense that the web-site is located on one particular server and totally controlled by one party, a
situation which is comparable to that of certain non-electronic media, such as, for example, printed matter, where the book is often considered a canon and may not be argued with (Bolter 1991: 150–3). This kind of electronic service is, however, well adapted to the presentation of mass-published, static information of a kind which is not designed to stimulate direct response, and most, not to say nearly all, web pages on the Internet today are of this kind. Here ICT is exclusively being used as an information system, also called a content management system in which information is stored, processed and retrieved. There is interaction with the computer and its content, but the communication potential of the technology is not being utilized, and there is no participation of individuals in a common public space.

Same time – other place

We have, in fact, already for a long time had access to a technological potential for synchronous electronic dialogue, in the form of the telephone. Here, two or more participants in different physical locations can engage in dialogue simultaneously. In contrast to the dialogue found in the various computer media, which is still mainly a written dialogue, this is oral dialogue, which means that some of the extra-linguistic potential inherent in the oral mode is retained. Video-conferencing combines the functions of the telephone and television, and computer conferencing enables participants to work more efficiently with shared documents in various virtual spaces. The chat room is still, for most people, a written medium, suitable for smaller groups of participants. The most important, shared characteristic of these media is that they are synchronous, that is the participants must be present in a shared digital space at the same time, while being able to be in entirely different geographical locations. The main difference between these media is that they support different types of social interaction, something which we will take a closer look at below. Whilst the telephone, for instance, has traditionally been a medium for dialogue between two individuals, video-conferencing mostly involves single individuals addressing larger groups of people, as is the case with lectures, or other events where oral communication is the preferred form. Computer conferencing combines oral and written communication, enabling the main focus to be placed on collaborative tasks which presuppose a sharing of the information which is to be dealt with by more than one participant. Computer conferencing, as well as chat rooms, support a type of interaction where many participants communicate simultaneously with many others.
There is a limit, however, as to how many may participate at the same time. Several participants may introduce a number of topics during a session, and the difficulty in keeping track of the multiple threads of discourse may soon change an otherwise synchronous communication into one that is experienced as fragmented and quite asynchronous.

**Other time – other place**

Electronic communication offers, however, a far wider choice, even by comparison with traditional written communication, which has not necessarily been dependent on identity of time and place. Much of the traditional written communication, in combination with the non-electronic postal function, falls into the same category as that of e-mail and discussion lists, but there is one major difference, namely the possibility for swift response. If we consider the increased speed of information transmission in broadband technology, and the possibility for different participants to be present at their networked computers at the same time, then electronic services like e-mail and interactive web-pages, like for instance weblogs, which are normally defined as asynchronous communication channels, will actually achieve a response time close to that of synchronous chat rooms (Chandler 1997). Since time is among the central factors in the establishment of a good dialogue, this must be regarded as an important technological development. At the same time, the fact that the participants do not need to be present simultaneously, is precisely one of the strong points of this model: in this way social interaction can take place across time zones and work situations. Asynchronous communication is also the natural choice when the participants want to exchange long, informative texts, and when they want more time to reflect on the content and on the form and quality of the response.

What, however, first and foremost characterizes the development of digital media is the strong tendency to combine the various functions outlined above in a converging of multimedia potential. The same medium or software often supports both synchronous and asynchronous interaction, and enables both oral, written and multimedia-based information processing. One and the same program may allow for both simulated face-to-face interaction, human–machine interaction and ICT-supported collaboration. It is up to the user of the program to determine which functions will be most suitable in a given discourse. The computer is becoming a wide range of tools for representation and communication, and participants may choose among several public spaces each with its special potential for immediacy and hypermediacy of
dialogue. There is also a converging of earlier Internet media into new arenas of digital communication with a potential and functionality that transgress the traditional boundaries of time and space in dialogue. The possibilities of broadband exchange and implementation of multimedia, particularly sound, give us new interactive Web sites.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have talked about an electronic discourse as a meaning-making social practice having the characteristics of dialogue, and I have presented just a handful of examples of a technological potential, aspects of today’s chronotopes, which influences the mediation of oral and written discourse in some electronic media. I have called this a re-mediation of discourse, with an emphasis on the added dimensions of time and space which we find in the synchronous and asynchronous potential of various ICT applications. I have pointed to a set of prerequisites for a dialogic discourse, and to the potential for such discourse in the new technologies of representation and communication which ICT represent in our culture. My intention has been, on the one hand, to point to some of the complexity of the ubiquitous and multimediated electronic discourses as objects of research. On the other hand, I have wanted to explore not just the technological potential of communication and dialogue, but the socio-cultural potential as well. It seems to me that the challenge is to take the step, both technologically and culturally, from a content management system and a computer-mediated communication (CMC) concerned with transmitting information, and on to a computer-supported collaboration (CSC) rooted in a culture of participative autonomy and based on an ontology of social participation that recognizes our common social space. That is surely to go beyond Bakhtin as far as participation in the technological social space of our time is concerned, but it may not be so when it comes to an understanding of the necessity for an ontology of social participation in order to achieve dialogue and avoid a collapse of communication in our culture. The dominating chronotopes of dialogue in various cultures may change, but Bakhtin’s reflection on the complexity and importance of the chronotope for understanding dialogue is equally valid.

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9

‘Thought Drawing’: Dialogical Thinking and Dialogical Culture at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art

Hege Charlotte Faber

Art as cultural research

The project Blikket [The Gaze] at The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) is a multidisciplinary effort whose purpose is to develop a historical and systematic understanding of the relationship between historical concepts of culture and various cultural practices of today.

For Blikket, a critique of an essentialist concept of culture is important. An essentialist concept of culture is one that is not tied to practice or historical context. A practice-free reason makes a sharp distinction between cultural theory and cultural practice. Science and research are connected to theory, and art to practice. If art is understood just as practice, it cannot be seen as research. On the contrary, it will remain as a subject to others to research.

But what would our concept of culture look like if we try to cross those borders and find another concept of culture, such as a dialogical one? Is it then possible to see art as a type of cultural research? I think so. When we connect the concept of art as cultural research to the Bakhtinian concept of dialogue, we can also examine the dialogue between theory and practice in the artist’s work.

Art can be looked upon as a way to obtain more knowledge. How one obtains knowledge through art is in and through the work of art itself. It's possible that artistic research can also offer important knowledge for other research milieus, in a dialogue with them. The Norwegian jazz musician Bjørn Alterhaug writes in an essay in the magazine Under Dusken that both art and artistic experience should be recognized on an
equal footing with science, so that each field could supplement and inspire the other (1998: 18).

Both art and science make constructions and fictions. According to the Norwegian art historian Gunnar Danbolt (1993: 23), it is primarily art that has made science realise that the past only exists for us as present texts and pictures that we can arrange and construct, and that both art and science have creative and systematic features. He argues that when painters start reflecting upon the problem of meaning, art has started moving towards science. Danbolt thinks it is important to see art as an open concept, a concept that functions as a prism rather than some kind of aesthetic dogma, a prism that opens up for a creative viewer, who may be the artist himself, or other people.

In Bakhtin’s thinking about language, the other (the viewer, the listener or the reader), is always answering in an active way: According to Bakhtin (1986: 68) ‘Any understanding of live speech, a live utterance, is inherently responsive, although the degree of this activity varies extremely’ Bakhtin (1986: 75–6) also states that ‘The work, like the rejoinder in dialogue, is oriented toward the response of the other (others), toward his active responsive understanding, which can assume various forms: educational influence on the readers, persuasion of them, critical responses, influence on followers and successors and so on.’

According to Bakhtin (1986: 67), 19th century linguistics, beginning with Wilhelm von Humboldt, tried to place the communicative function of language in the background as something secondary. Instead, focus was placed on the passive receiver/listener: ‘Language is regarded from the speaker’s standpoint as if there were only one speaker who does not have any necessary relation to other participants in speech communication. If the role of the other is taken into account at all, it is the role of a listener, who understands the speaker only passively.’

In art and aesthetics, we find the idea of the passive (disinterested) viewer beginning with Immanuel Kant and the aesthetics of the 18th century. But from a Bakhtinian perspective, the passive viewer disappears: art will always be in a dialogue with other art and also with the world, and works of art and art viewers (or users) will also always be in a dialogue with each other. The Austrian artist and art theoretician Peter Weibel says that:

A polyphonic world arises out of Bakhtin’s method of interaction, dialogue and context. Art is not something standing outside of this world, but something that takes part in a complex network. Hence art can be understood as the world’s text and the world as context for
art, just as the world can be understood as text for art and art as context for the world. The inner, formal elements of the ‘work of art’ and its outer, social components stand in a dialogue with each other, in interaction, while contextualising, conditioning and constituting each other. The relationship between the work of art and the interpreter must be understood in the same way.

(1994: 14, my translation)

We could say that when artists make works of art, they are conducting research projects in a certain language, a language that exists because of the existence of art. Their research will be made in certain materials and media, and in a current dialogue with other works of art, and with other artists and viewers.

To support this view, we can make links to the art and ideas of the sixties, seventies and eighties (especially to minimalism, conceptual art and land art), where important discussions, beginning in the 1960s, remained a lively part of discussions into the nineties. This does not mean that I see the period from the 1960s to the end of the nineties as a linear evolution of progress, but rather as a network of overlapping discussions, views and ideas. Conceptual art came into being as a significant and innovative method of artistic practice in the 1960s. The work of art as an object seemed to disappear, with language and communication taking its place instead. It is also possible to draw a parallel to the way accessibility to computers changed in concept, and in use from office to home. The technological development also resulted, implicitly, in a shift from the visible to the invisible (Morgan 1996: 3). Art became less an object for interpretation and more the focus itself. The well-known conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth suggested that conceptual art is a method of investigation that parallels other methods in the natural and social sciences (Morgan 1996: 35).

Throughout the history of art, artists have written about their own work or about art in general, in letters, manifests, articles, notebooks, aphorisms, essays, poetics or in interviews and discussions. Still, it can be a large conceptual leap from those genres to more traditional research projects. And it may be difficult to demand that the artist shift to a scientific genre and express himself in scientific language. And it is far too time-consuming to examine the historical writings of artists. I will instead present a dialogue I had with some students at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art.

‘Thought drawing’

In the spring of 1998, I arranged a writing workshop with a small group of first-year students (Björn Hegardt, Jens Laland, Trond Hugo Haugen,
Theo Ågren and Synne Holst-Pedersen). I had prepared lectures and introductions – inspired by writing courses conducted by Marte Halse and Sissel Lie, and also based on my own experience as an art critic. However, the students were not all that interested in lectures or in learning how to write. They were interested in their own work, projects they were working on in their studios right then and there. And they were interested in how they could use the writing as a tool. They wanted to hear about how I work with texts, how I start to write, how I get my ideas to move from key words and sketches to a ‘real’ piece of writing. After a while, we decided that all participants should write about their own work. In practice that meant, each time we chose a work in progress to write about, with one student writing about his or her own work, and the others writing about another person’s work. Would each art student’s perspective differ much from one another? Would the student’s reflections be much different from mine?

The workshop lasted two days, and we had only two hours for each effort so that we would have enough time to read and discuss each text. The time limitation made the writing intensive! I was interested to see what would come out of such a project, in which one is forced to think fast, to articulate thoughts that have not yet found their way onto paper, and which therefore may feel like new insights. The result might also be that the students would find that writing can impart new knowledge as one thinks and struggles with language and words, materials that give a different resistance than a wall, a screen or a computer program.

What happens when artists write about their own and other artists’ work? We can connect writing to experience, reflection, sensation and thinking: we can create new concepts like ‘write-thinking’, ‘create-writing’ and so on. We cannot know all our thoughts and knowledge before the writing starts, but we can suggest as a starting point that the act of writing itself contributes to new knowledge and new insights into what we are writing about. We would like to read the work, to interpret it – and to write about it as if we were in love.

I shall examine the pieces that were written about the work of one student named Björn Hegardt. He had not ever written anything at all about his work in progress. What he wrote was a handful of ways to look at the problem that interests him. For this class, he wrote a collection of key words connected to his field of interest, and suggested ways to examine the problem that interests him:

the inclination of a line …
to investigate the inclinations
thought, milieu, events
the spatial possibilities
activate empty surfaces with events in the periphery

Those key words say something about what art – in this case – is going to investigate, what it will be about. Drawing, photography and a mixture of different genres allow perspectives and spatial possibilities to be investigated on paper, on walls and in architectural space.

A fellow student chose to emphasize the poetic aspects of this work, but he also offered his own experience of the piece as an active respondent:

The little man dressed in a simple jacket, invisible along the wall. With a pencil, he draws small stories. Hidden away, at the bottom and on the top. A little aeroplane, a small house, a small azure square; small stories. Plain, vulnerable and sensitive.

Until the rain washes the little man's memories away, and the narrow passage is left alone, naked.

When this student talks about how he experiences the work, it is as a viewer and interpreter. Here, we can see a difference between the creator and the viewer of a certain work of art. But there also can be little difference between the viewer and the creator, as illustrated by one of the other student essays, which addresses the process of creating a work of art:

Like in a dream – it just goes on and on, changes – transforms. One thinks – and then it becomes something new.

How shall we read this text? The distinction between theory and practice is blurred and fades away: ‘One thinks – and then it becomes something new.’ One thinks as one creates art. Is it a kind of ‘creative thinking’? What does it mean that the writer sees the work ‘like in a dream’? Is that an aspect only of artistic work, or could it also be an aspect of other kinds of work, such as natural science?

The biochemist James D. Watson, who won the Nobel prize in physiology and medicine for his work about the structure of nucleic acids, writes in his humorous, autobiographical book *The Double Helix* (1968) about the methods he used as he searched for the structure of the DNA molecule. His work was conducted from 1951 to 1953, when Watson was in his early twenties. He writes about the importance of daydreams: ‘...
I huddled next to the fireplace, daydreaming about how several DNA chains could fold together in a pretty and hopefully scientific way’ (1968: 152–3). And he talks about the scientific relevance of travel by bus, bicycle and train: ‘... on the bus to Oxford the notion came to me... . The idea was so simple that it had to be right. Every helical staircase I saw that weekend in Oxford made me more confident that other biological structures would also have helical symmetry’ (1968: 114). After an intensive period of work with different hypotheses about the structure of DNA, he finally came up with the answer:

Afterwards, in the cold almost unheated train compartment, I sketched on the blank edge of my newspaper what I remembered of the B pattern. Then as the train jerked toward Cambridge, I tried to decide between two- and three-chain models. As far as I could tell, the reason the King’s group did not like two chains was not foolproof ... . Thus by the time I had cycled back to college and climbed over the back gate, I had decided to build two-chain models.

(1968: 171).

But to daydream that a DNA-molecule is structured in a double helix is only possible if you have thought hard about the structure when you are awake. And it might that way with art as well, that you can find a solution ‘in a dream’ – or when you take the bus.

To be able to see and develop connections between natural and social science, new technology, art and the humanities is an important idea behind the NTNU construction. But it is both striking and interesting that the Bakhtin Circle were engaged with the then-contemporary research in all those fields, and that they crossed the borders between those disciplines without any inhibitions at all! The relationship between art and technology and natural and other sciences has always existed, at least until we adopted the ‘modern’ concept of art first defined during the 18th century.

But those connections broke down with the work of philosophers such as John Locke, and later, Immanuel Kant, and with the growth of the so-called institution of art. Science, ethics and art were separated into different, autonomous spheres. Kant presented perhaps the most important philosophical arguments for that separation. In the 19th century, science began to dominate, and the other spheres become marginal. The situation worsens with positivism, because the ideal becomes that ‘knowledge should be expressed clearly and exactly in sentences that can be verified or falsified’. Positivism is characterized by
an interest in what is presented or given, that which must be accepted as is and cannot be further explained. The positivistic point of view is mainly concerned with general phenomena, those that can be repeated and therefore thoroughly investigated, observed and explained by certain laws. The particular is not of interest. For art, however, that is precisely what is interesting.

Nevertheless, both Else Marie Bukdahl, head of the Royal Danish Academy of Art in Copenhagen and the Norwegian philosopher Arnfinn Bø Rygg find interesting connections between art and natural science in the experiment. For instance, Bukdahl writes that:

The long history of Western European culture shows us that art always has had a close relationship to natural science. Again and again, both painters and sculptors have expanded their field of experience as a result of their treatment of new scientific knowledge. And it is worth noting that observation, experience and experiment are important starting points for both the artist’s and the scientist’s attempt to gain new knowledge about the world we live in.

(1994: 37, my translation)

The art historian Gunnar Danbolt (1994) shows us for example that Picasso conducted a number of experiments when he worked on Guernica. Even if Picasso did not write anything down, he provided photographic documentation of all the different stages in Guernica’s development, and he kept all the sketches he made during that time. As a result, it is possible to examine all the material that ended up in this famous work of art.

A more recent example can be found in the work of the Swedish artist Anna Karin Rynander (b. 1960), who made 11 Interactive Sound Refreshment Stations (1998) (or ‘Sound Showers’) to decorate Gardermoen airport. These ‘Sound Showers’ are integrated sound art refreshment facilities to make the airport more enjoyable for travellers. Users enter a circle-shaped mark on the floor, and then a positive, refreshing sound starts, varying from the sound of waves, to bird songs and babbling babies to positive words written by and whispered by positive Norwegian individuals. Rynander has kept all her project descriptions, sketches and preliminary experiments, and she also sees the ‘Sound Showers’ in relation to her earlier works of sound art. Consequently, she is able to recreate, write and talk about the process that has resulted in the eleven showers.

Returning to student Björn Hegardt’s work, a third classmate asks if we can interpret Hegardt’s work at all, and if we can, how do we interpret...
it. He suggests that we must look at it through our own experiences with drawing and that we also have to view this particular work the context of contemporary art:

In the beginning, before the line. Independent of paper. A pencil and a storyteller. The fundament, that which he draws on, the place where he presents the wandering of the pencil stroke. The context? A sheet and a solitary human being. Is this a world we can get into at all? Or are we shut out from such a soundless, silent temptation? Is this a story we can read, without knowing if we can write or draw ourselves into it? How are we supposed to understand his drawing? Through our own experience with drawing? The line is a track we can follow. Where it takes us, we do not know until we get there. It goes alongside and outwards – and then it suddenly leaves the format one expected.

He analyses the work further, by asking questions about concepts such as perspective, flatness, sign, illusion and reality – and he also suggests that it is the work of art itself that asks the questions:

But does the line blast the format when it acts in a world without any format? What is perspective, what is flatness, what is sign? Suddenly, the line goes into a room, while other times, it is content to crawl along the outside of something. Sometimes, this is just a wall; and then the wall or the room is a part of the world we physically belong to. Then we in a way know where we are. But suddenly, we are left by ourselves. We fall out of reality, and simply have to accept whatever Björn is willing to give us, if we are to go on further. It is not enough to follow the tracks of the pencil.

In some places, the drawing is emphasized with opaque paint. At other times, the colour functions as a supplementing comment (or the story itself claims to be told in colour). Does the line leave behind a photography as a reference, or is it a meeting that is explained?

That thinking actually might occur in the work of art itself is an interesting point of view to ponder. The Norwegian professor of literary criticism Atle Kittang, writes that thought can be connected to art in three main ways (1994: 6, my translation):

(1) A thought or an idea stands behind a work of art: the artist has something to say (a meaning, an intention and so on) that he communicates through an artistic medium.
A work of art presents itself in its meeting with the audience (a reader, a viewer, a listener) as thought-provoking, and starts a thought process (or reflection) in the audience. 

That a work of art is thought-provoking, might also mean that there is a certain kind of thinking in the work of art itself, a ‘thought process’ which cannot be reduced to the thought the artist might have had in his head before he made the work, or to the thought the receiver might find in the work, with respect to the possible intention of the artist.

But what is it that happens in or through the work of art itself? Kittang asks if thinking about the work is about art itself, about the conditions of art and about the theory of art.

The fourth of Hegardt’s fellow students created a new concept, which he called a ‘thought drawing’. With this concept, theory and practice are intertwined in an interesting way. According to the student, thinking and art also go together in play:

Björn plays with concepts like time, space and perspective. The border between two and three dimensions opens up, the drawings continue on the wall, the paintings become a kind of object-picture when they continue around the corner.

Very often, it is the line that links the different pictures together: The line becomes a line of thinking that leads the viewer around in the picture, in and out and around, amongst the symbols Björn uses. The symbols are bound together in apparently impossible combinations: an aeroplane together with a saw, a wisp of mist that has moved into the sitting room.

In Björn’s pictures, we can often follow his line of thought, a tunnel from one element leads us farther into a very special world, a world that does not have a beginning or an end, but just goes on and on.

James D. Watson also emphasizes the aspect of playfulness:

In place of pencil and paper, the main working tools were a set of molecular models superficially resembling the toys of pre-school children.

We could thus see no reason why we should not solve DNA in the same way. All we had to do was to construct a set of molecular models and begin to play – with luck, the structure would be a helix.
Watson stresses that (the natural) sciences seldom proceed in the straightforward logical manner that most people might think (1968: xi). In the early fifties, he writes, it was not acceptable to ‘sit down and play’ in order to get scientific results: ‘... our past hooting about model building represented a serious approach to science, not the easy resort of slackers who wanted to avoid the hard work necessitated by an honest scientific career’ (1968: 212).

* * *

Through the quotations from the students’ texts, we realize that it is possible to gain insights into one’s own and other people’s art by ‘reflective writing’. We probably knew that beforehand. But the important thing is that none of the writers distinguish between theory and practice. For them, the two activities are intimately tied to each other. The student who made the work says that he would like to investigate ‘the inclination, details, milieus, events, the spatial possibilities’ – and the investigation happens in the work of art itself. The fellow students say that ‘one thinks, and then it becomes something new’, or that ‘the line becomes a line of thinking ...’ The thinking is not something that comes afterwards as a kind of supplement to the art itself.

Art and answerability

From Romanticism, we acquire an understanding of the artist not as a thinking and reasonable person, but as an inspired and creative genius, who creates his marvellous works of art without being conscious of his doings. In fact, the artist might even be crazy!

Bakhtin’s short text ‘Art and Answerability’ (1919), might be read as a critique of the romantic inspired genius, the person who dives into a world of inspiration – a world quite different from the one in which we live our daily lives. Bakhtin stresses that this results in art that is too self-conscious and too far from life (1995: 1). The Bakhtinian critique also shares ideas with the American philosopher Arthur C. Danto’s more recent critique of the Greenbergian influence on Western art, or the formalist point of view.3

Bakhtin’s text is obviously also a critique of the (solipsistic) ‘art in the ivory tower’, or, of the 19th-century movement, ‘art for art’s sake’, where the main task was to defend art’s right to be itself and the artist’s right to do what he wanted. Art for art’s sake was all about the autonomy of art, and therefore very important at that time. Nevertheless, this movement ended up in a formalist, and perhaps also ‘monologist’
modernism:

Art is too self-confident, audaciously self-confident, and too high-flown, for it is in no way bound to answer for life. And of course, life has no hope of ever catching up with art of this kind.

(1995: 1)

Mikhail Bakhtin asks for what he (in the English translation of his text) calls the *answerability* between art and life. What is ‘answerability’? I think of associations to answers, responsibility, response, the possibility to answer, the capacity to answer – and the duty to answer. If we draw a parallel to ‘The Problem of Speech Genres’, we remember that the other (the listener, the viewer or the audience) is always answering in an active way (1986: 68–9). And even if Bakhtin’s literary work is living and inconstant, and therefore not as unambiguous as we might like, we might see the term ‘answerability’ in connection with a part of his essay about the chronotope:

The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as a part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers.

(1981: 254)

The focus is on the dialogue between art and life. Art cannot put itself outside of life, because if it does, it becomes ‘too self-confident, too high-flown’ (1995: 1).

In Bakhtin’s texts, there are close links between art and life. Bakhtin’s way of thinking is organic: it always includes the others, not only as accidental things in the world, but as necessary partners in dialogue. To focus on dialogue between people, or between people and works of art, is a profound critique of any kind of philosophical solipsism. And it is also a profound critique of the tendency to see the art audience as passive receivers.

**Conclusion**

My examples have been from a writing workshop at the art academy. Those texts were about the student’s own creative work at the academy. But to be able to write pieces like this, a writer must have both conceptual
competence and practical skill. To study art means to come to know a field of knowledge, to learn about contemporary and historical art, to find out what is possible to do in art at certain times, and to get a solid competence when it comes to the making of art. And, of course, it is impossible to make art without thinking about what you are doing, while you are doing it.

Even if nobody had written about Björn’s work of art before, it is a very important part of the activity at an art academy to encourage and nurture an ongoing dialogue about art. The dialogue is about the capacity to answer in an active way, always, both with respect to contemporary and historical art. According to the Danish philosopher Søren Kjørup, the best experience of a picture is the one you get in a dialogue, in front of the picture. Here, in front of the picture, you can listen to what others say, and test your own observations (1996: 177).

The concept of situated knowledge, which implies that all knowledge is something that is communicated in a concrete situation, under certain conditions, at a certain time, is a concept of knowledge that is founded in dialogue, communication and context. This concept can also characterize the activity at the academy: practice and theory are intertwined, and the whole culture of the academy is based on dialogue and that we are situated in our own time.

At the academy, it is essential that students discuss their work in the studio situation. The works are discussed among the students themselves, and with people like other artists, philosophers, writers, art historians and art critics.

The dialogical culture at the academy, and the fact that the students know each other’s work quite well and are used to discussing them, explains why such interesting texts came out of the experimental writing workshop. When we discuss art at the academy, it’s possible to think there are many voices speaking, many more than we might imagine. To say it as Bakhtin might have said it: we are an integral part of a great chain of art communication. According to Bakhtin, it is:

... either a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalised, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent development of the dialogue.

(1986: 170)
The culture and thinking at the academy can be viewed as a network of overlapping discussions, views and ideas, a network of related ways to think about art. This concept of culture is not an essentialist one. On the contrary, it is a complicated network of resemblance that overlaps and crosses, a current and critical dialogue between artists and works of art, a never-ending story.

Notes
1. Because those texts were originally written in Norwegian or Swedish, I have tried to translate them into English. Some of them might have suffered because of this.
2. Watson won the prize together with Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins in 1962, as a result of their important contribution to the understanding of the structure of nucleic acids.
3. See for instance Danto (1997). Danto’s main argument is that everything is possible in contemporary art, and that a formalist point of view is more or less outdated by history. It would certainly be of interest to have a closer look into this theme, but that will remain for another paper.

References
The words ‘dialogical’ or ‘dialogism’ appear often in literary criticism and philosophy, but further research is necessary regarding the meaning of these terms in the visual arts. When applied to visual arts, these terms usually become tropes similar to their counterparts in literary theory, that is, metaphors to support the analysis of cultural products that are materially self-contained (for example books, paintings) and therefore incapable of creating the living experience of dialogues. It is clear that one can engage in a dialogue about a book, but the book itself is not a dialogical medium. The understanding of art as inter-communication moves us away from the issue of ‘what is it that art or the artist communicates?’ to question the very structure of the communication process itself. It is not so much what is being communicated in a particular situation that is at stake, but the very possibility of verbi-vocal-visual interlocution that ultimately characterizes symbolic exchanges. Works of art created with telematic media are communication events in which information flows in multiple directions. These events aim not to represent a transformation in the structure of communication, but to create the experience of it. I propose that new insights can be gained by examining art works that are themselves real dialogues, that is, active forms of communication between two living entities. These works can often be found among artists that pursue the aesthetics of telecommunications media. To name these works, I propose a literal use of the term ‘dialogism’. I will present four main ideas. First, it is important to identify and articulate the significance of the field of practice that I refer to as ‘dialogical art’. Secondly, there is a clear difference between dialogical art and interactive art (all dialogical works are interactive, not all ‘interactive’ works are dialogical). Thirdly, dialogical aesthetics is intersubjective and stands in stark contrast with monological art, which is
largely based on the concept of individual expression. Lastly, because it employs media that enable real dialogues, electronic art is uniquely suited to explore and develop a radical (that is literal) dialogical aesthetics. Seen collectively, these notions will inform the identification and study of what can be properly called ‘dialogical electronic art’.

**Introduction**

One of the most important contributions of electronic art in the second half of the 20th century was the introduction of what I call the ‘dialogic principle in the visual arts’. This means that dialogic electronic art undermines emphasis on visuality to give precedence instead to interrelationship and connectivity. These two terms do not designate purely theoretical concepts. Interrelationship and connectivity refer to tangible processes that enable the emergence of dialogic artworks. While dialogism in art is not exclusive to media-based propositions, as Lygia Clark’s relational works and some of Suzanne Lacy’s social projects so clearly demonstrate, the creation of media-based dialogic art is particularly important. It finds a model in the unpredictable loop of ideas, gestures, words, gazes, sounds and reactions interlocutors perform in real time according to one’s feedback to the other’s utterances.

Naturally, dialogic electronic art is interactive, but dialogism in electronic art must not be confused with interactivity. Many interactive electronic artworks are monologic, for example, a CD-ROM or a self-contained Web site. Some interactive electronic artworks are dialogic without employing telecommunications media, as exemplified by Piero Gilardi’s ‘Shared Dolor’ (2000), in which two participants recline opposite to one another and together navigate a virtual world as they touch each other’s hand. As much as local dialogical interaction is important and deserves to be further discussed, my focus is on telecommunications-based dialogicality, as it overcomes local boundaries and enables intersubjective experiences through the network on a global scale.

Dialogic electronic art has exhibited the collapse of the sender/receiver bipolarity of Jakobson’s schematic communication model, and is inventing the multilogue of networking as a collaborative art form. Positioning itself against monologic ideologies that structure the mediascape, as exemplified by one-way television broadcasting, dialogic electronic art remains open to differentiated levels of contingency and indeterminacy. Media-based dialogic artworks are important not only because they enable new kinds of dialogues to emerge in art, but also because they remind us that it is possible (and desirable) to stimulate dialogue. Works
that make open and emancipative use of telecommunications media, in association with the Internet or not, are representative of the dialogic adventure in electronic art. Also significant are works that do not exist as independent entities and in a direct way depend on what interactants bring to the experience. My intention here is to propose a literal interpretation of dialogicality in art. I wish to assert the importance of art works in which actual dialogical experiences (that is, dialogues of various kinds) take place. I hope that, by acknowledging the differences between monologic and dialogic modalities of art, we can recognise the unique contribution of the latter as a promoter of new aesthetic values such as real-time remote interaction, intersubjectivity, and negotiation of meaning through manipulation of visual elements. To that end, I will discuss some key concepts of dialogism and provide examples that illustrate the emergence of dialogical electronic art since the 1960s.

**Dialogic philosophy and collaborative art**

A major manifestation of the digital revolution is the Web, the most popular of Internet protocols. While the Internet is made up of several different protocols, many of which enable intersubjective linking among participants, the Web itself has not privileged synchronous two-way social interaction. Likewise, most of what we see on the Web under the rubric of art is as monological as painting or television. It is useful to remember that the initial impulse behind the Web was to produce a publishing instrument, not a dialogic medium. The monological models that prevail online show, I believe, that electronic art has more to learn from Martin Buber’s philosophy and from interactional sociolinguistics than from computer science.

Dialogic philosophy was elaborated by Buber in regards to interpersonal relationships (Buber 1987). Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogics was a platform for the study of the literary genre of the novel. In both cases, the intellectual achievement of these thinkers can be (and has been) expanded and extended not only to philosophy and literature, but also to several other areas of study. Bakhtin clearly recognized the dynamic and intersubjective nature of language beyond what he understood to be Saussure’s rigid model. For Bakhtin, human consciousness is the semiotic intercourse of one subject with another, that is, consciousness is at once inside and outside the subject. The novel, by its very nature as print, freezes speech rather than promotes its flow. The novel preserves imagined interactions on paper; it does not enable, nor could it, the truly dialogic and unpredictable nature of language as
experienced in interlocutive reciprocity. This can only be accomplished via face-to-face interactions or with two-way media works. Acknowledging the conceptual gap between the novel (print) and other genres (media), Bakhtin wrote:

> It seems to us that one could speak directly of a special polyphonic artistic thinking extending beyond the bounds of the novel as a genre. This mode of thinking makes available those sides of a human being, and above all the thinking human consciousness and the dialogical sphere of its existence, which are not subject to artistic assimilation from monologic positions.

(Bakhtin 1984: 270)

For Bakhtin, language is not an abstract system, but a material means of production. In a very concrete way the body of the sign is negotiated, altered, and exchanged via a process of contention and dialogue. Meaning arises along the way. Bakhtin is very clear: ‘the thinking human consciousness and the dialogic sphere in which this consciousness exists, in all its depth and specificity, cannot be reached through a monologic artistic approach’ (Bakhtin 1984: 271).

If taken literally, as I believe it should be, Bakhtin’s approach reveals the possibility of articulating artworks that give no prerogative to visuality and that reinstate the dialogic in the aesthetic experience. In this scenario, images (and objects) become one among many elements in the elaboration of dialogic situations. Visual dialogues, for example, imply the exchange and manipulation of images in real time. In this case, we no longer speak of space as form, but instead concentrate on the time of formation and transformation of the image – as in speech. This, of course, demands a revision of the most entrenched convictions of what art is, from its material base and predominant ocularcentrism to its unilateral reception, semiotic negotiation, distribution logic and social meaning.

When applying Bakhtin’s ideas to the visual arts, commentators, despite their enthusiasm for his work have been unable to show that dialogism always had the potential to be more than a literary trope. Because the dialogic principle is deeply rooted in the social reality of consciousness, thought, and communication, it is precisely there that it ought to be explored aesthetically. Allusions to dialogism in reference to wall hangings and other objects miss the opportunity to contribute a theoretical viewpoint to the actual embodiment of dialogical principles in art. The dialogic principle changes our conception of art; it offers a new
way of thinking that requires the use of bidirectional or multidirectional media and the creation of situations that can actually promote intersubjective experiences that engage two or more individuals in real dialogic exchanges. Through creative network topologies, artists can enable the realisation of experiences that I call ‘multilogic interactions’. Multilogic interactions are complex real-time contexts in which the process of dialogue is extended to three or more persons in an ongoing open exchange. What one says or does directly affects and is affected by what the others say or do.7

The dialogic imagination has the potential to push art even beyond advanced notions of collaboration and participation. In the modern sense of the term, collaboration in the visual arts has been pursued since the first decades of the 20th century. The playfulness of strategies such as the exquisite corpse enraptured writers and artists such as Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Yves Tanguy and Man Ray. Breton wrote that the collective production of a sentence or drawing ‘bore the mark of something that could not be created by one brain alone’ and that it ‘provoked a vigorous play of often extreme discordances, but also supported the idea of communication between the participants’ (Breton 1966: 95). There are significant parallels between the shared authorship of the exquisite corpse and the collaborative procedures typical of telecommunications art. One significant difference is that in the co-presence of the participants communication is partially influenced by the local behaviour of the participants. Artists working through telematic networks can operate between synchronous and asynchronous time. They can also limit the exchange to specific channels (thus exploring a focused mode of communication), incorporate network noise into the experience; work the visual, audio or verbal material simultaneously; convert one into the other (since through the network they are data), or explore the non-deductive response enabled by geographic distance (that is, response in the absence of the source of sound or image).

**Dialogic imagination**

Another important early sign of a reaction against monologic ideologies in art is Brecht’s call in 1926 for radio to cease being unidirectional and to enable dialogue and response. Brecht stated that radio should be bidirectional and that it should stop forming passive consumers and allow them to become producers. In other words, he proposed to change radio from a distribution medium to a communication medium. Brecht
argued that radio should know ‘how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him’. (Brecht 1986). Brecht is among the first artists to understand the importance of undoing the monologism of media and to propose dialogic alternatives to them. His 1929 radio work ‘Lindbergh’s Flight’, still available in an original recording from 1930 (Brecht and Weill 1990) was revolutionary in its time. Although not implemented as such, it proposed a radio broadcast complemented with readings by members of the local audience.

Throughout the 20th century new concerns for dialogicality slowly emerged. In the 1930s and 1940s, while early kinetic art had already moved sculpture beyond fixed form, the few kinetic artworks produced then still called for a contemplative viewer. This started to change with the first works that required direct, physical involvement on the part of the viewer. This non-contemplative strategy, which depended on viewer interaction, was a first step towards future dialogicality.

Moholy-Nagy created kinaesthetically interactive works in 1936, when he lived in London. His ‘Gyros’ was a kinetic sculpture composed of girating glass rods filled with mercury. Elegantly suspended over a reflective metallic surface, the two mercury-filled structures had to be spun by hand in order to reveal their performative potentialities. The effect was accentuated by the structure’s duplication as a reflected image. His ‘light painting’ was constituted by two painted and engraved celluloid sheets spiral bound to a painted background. The viewer was asked to manipulate the sheets. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy remembered in 1950 that, in creating this work, ‘the re-creative action became his goal, the establishment of an immediate relationship between spectator and object’ (Moholy-Nagy, S. 1950: 202). Moholy himself described the effect: ‘The slight warpage and motion of the hinged celluloid sheets produces a combination of reflections and shadows on the background and the pigmented surfaces of the wings achieving an effective combination’ (Moholy-Nagy, L. 1947: 167). Sibyl Moholy-Nagy pointed out that the experience ‘depended on the action of the spectator’ and that one ‘could create a variety of light and colour combinations of his own choice’ (Moholy-Nagy, S. 1950: 203). The aesthetic parameters in these two works deliberately replaced static form and contemplation with action, immediate relationship, combinatory operations, participation, and choice.

Pushing these premises further, the Buenos Aires-based Madi movement produced works in the 1940s and 1950s with indeterminate mobile structures that were meant to be manipulated by the viewer and which,
therefore, had no finite form. These works reflected formal concerns, but they opened up new and unexpected interactive possibilities. The material configuration of these works demanded active participation, ultimately leaving the experience open-ended. Outstanding examples of these early forms of interactive art are ‘Roij’ (1944), an articulated wooden sculpture by Gyula Kosice (1982: 267) and the articulated wall paintings by Diyi Laañ (Ades 1989: 246), Arden Quín (1997: 38), and Sandú Darié (Borràs 1997: 88–9). These artists proposed that art should reach beyond fixed form to engage the viewer in a transformative process.

I find striking conceptual connections between the ideas embedded in these pioneering works and much of the participatory art of the sixties, when the ornamental qualities of the discrete objet d’art gave way to propositions that privileged challenging concepts and culturally meaningful ideas. This often meant that actions were more important than products, technological media more appropriate to the Zeitgeist than precious materials, and that lived experiences were more significant than contemplation of pictorial form. This radical change led to the unpredictability that results from the direct involvement of the participant, echoing Bakhtinian concepts such as outsideness, answerability, and unfinalizability. I suggest that the roots of contemporary dialogical art experiences can be traced back to this arc of experimentation briefly summarized here – from modern avant-garde collaborations and interactive propositions to the dematerialised and participatory events of the 1960s and 1970s. This makes evident, I believe, that dialogism is an intrinsic and continuous development in art, which results from the increased dissatisfaction with concepts of art centered on the individual and on romantic heroic myths, as elaborated by Clement Greenberg and others.

Crucial in the context of dialogic experimentation in the arts is the understanding that radical works of art cannot be limited by visuality; instead they are lived experiences based on contextual reciprocity (the context of the experience is reciprocal, that is, it enables one to take the initiative to interfere and alter the experience). The outdated rubric of ‘visual arts’ is unable to express the gamut and complexity of the experiences developed within a truly dialogic framework. We are no longer contemplating the notion of the artist as the individual who works in isolation and who provides the audience with a personal vision of an idea or emotion as embodied in a rigid material composition in a system of time deferral. This model, which affirms the primacy of individuality, simply does not have the power to suggest alternatives to unidirectional and conventional modes of thinking and perception. It
is based on the belief that an individual has the need (and particular skills) to externalize emotions and inner visions. This assumes that the ‘individual’ is a discrete psychological entity and not a dialogical subject in perpetual negotiation with others. This model is too far removed from the reality of a networked world in a global economy. Or, as Suzi Gablik so poignantly put it: ‘Modernist aesthetics, concerned with itself as the chief source of value, did not inspire creative participation; rather, it encouraged distancing and depreciation of the Other. Its nonrelational, noninteractive, nonparticipatory orientation did not easily accommodate the more feminine values of care and compassion, of seeing and responding to need. The notion of power that is implied by asserting one’s individuality and having one’s way through being invulnerable leads, finally, to a deadening of empathy’ (Gablik 1995: 80).

The dialogic imagination in electronic art enables us to think about notions of alterity in a larger sense, beyond representation politics and the specific situated conditions of given groups. Needless to say, the struggle for acceptance and recognition of outnumbered groups within a given social system is more than a necessity; it is often a matter of physical, intellectual and emotional survival. However, instead of constituting specific groups as Other, peripheral to a given dominant group, Buber’s philosophy of dialogue foregrounds the simple and radical notion that I and Thou relate as subjects through reciprocity and mutuality. Likewise, Bakhtin’s dialogic literary theory articulates the idea that meaning only emerges in dialogic relations with the other. Despite the original contexts and impetuses that prompted Buber and Bakhtin to develop their work, that is, Buber’s manifest theology and Bakhtin’s literary emphasis despite his strong religiosity (developed under a totalitarian regime that suppressed religion),10 we must not lose sight of the political statements they make. Buber makes it clear that 1-It connections objectify subjects in disproportionate relationships that involve control of passive objects. For Bakhtin, monologic discourse is that which tries to negate the dialogic nature of our very existence – always the case of political discourse. For both men these ideas were not just theoretical exercises. The rise of Nazism forced Buber to leave Germany in 1933. One year later, Martin Heidegger answered a phone call from the Nazis and accepted their order to eliminate Jewish faculty and curricula from his university. Bakhtin was arrested in Stalin’s Soviet Union in 1929 (for expressing his spiritual connection with the Orthodox church) and exiled because of poor health. This most likely saved him from the fate that befell his colleague Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev (arrested and shot in 1938 in one of Stalin’s purges).
The political dimension of dialogism is intrinsically connected to its aesthetic potential. Buber states that the spirit is not in individuals but between them. For Bakhtin the aesthetic event implies the dialogic interaction of two distinct consciousnesses. Taken literally, as I wish to do here, once the premise of a dialogical aesthetics is uttered, it becomes clear that traditional visual arts are monologic, for they offer finite forms in unidirectional systems of meaning. One is often left to marvel at the individual artist’s idea, skill, or craft, rather than find himself or herself in a situation in which his or her own active cognitive, perceptual, and motor engagement ignites the discovery of one’s creative potential and other relational processes. Vilém Flusser who, like Buber, left Europe fleeing the Nazis, clearly understood the relevance of dialogics not only as aesthetic parameter but also as social and ethical philosophy. He stated that ‘what we call “I” is a knot of relations’ (Flusser 1994: 32), and in a brilliant summary he gave the following examples to support his position:

Analytic psychology is able to show that what we call an individual psyche is nothing but the tip of an iceberg of what might be called a collective psyche. Ecological studies are able to show that individual organisms must be understood to be functions of a relational context best called an ecosystem. Politological studies can show that ‘individual man’ and ‘society’ are abstract terms (there is no man outside society, and no society without men), and that the concrete fact is intersubjective relations. This relational (topological) vision of our position coincides with the relational vision the physical and biological sciences propose to us with regard to the physical world. The physical objects are now seen to be knots within relational fields, and the living organisms are now seen to be provisional protuberances out from the flow of genetic information. Husserl’s phenomenology is possibly the most adequate articulation of this relational vision, and it is becoming ever more adequate as our knowledge advances. It states (to put it in a nutshell) that what is concrete in the world we live in, are relations, and that what we call ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, are abstract extrapolations from these concrete relations.

(Flusser 1994: 33)

Drawing from the collective insights of Buber and Bakhtin, Gablik and Flusser, and many other authors (Tannen 1990; Bauer and McKinstry 1991; Eisenstadt 1992; Ascott 2003) a rough sketch of a dialogical aesthetics emerges, one that is concerned not with sensory cognition or
beauty, but with intersubjectivity. A truly dialogic art evolves its own parameters. Just as in the system of broadcast television, in which it is technically irrelevant if a given spectator is actually watching a program, in the monologic system of art it is irrelevant to an object if anyone is before it. The actual presence of individuals in space and time, remotely or not, is, of course, of great relevance in life, and so it is in dialogic art. In a dialogic context the presence of an individual has a bearing on what kinds of experiences might unfold. Many works that try to break away from the monologic model find in the promise of computer-based interactivity a latent liberating horizon. However, electronic interaction has the danger of promoting instead interpassive experiences that catalogue all possibilities within a pre-established and restrictive system of choices. In this case, the interactant has to choose one option after another, being ultimately guided down a multioptional monologic path. No doubt capable of creating works of distinct cultural relevance in the above-mentioned scenario, interactive art will only fulfil its greater potential, I believe, when it absorbs the dialogic stimulus provided by the actual engagement of two or more individuals in direct dialogic situations, or in multilogic interactions.

**Dialogic electronic art**

The dialogic model in electronic art will not be expressed via arrangements that privilege teleological human-computer interfaces (unless, perhaps, if we consider ‘machine consciousness’). The *a priori* determination of the behavior of the computer or the device prevents true responsiveness, surprise, and synergetic interaction. We have a lot to learn from a preverbal child who grabs a book with the left hand, looks at you, and with the right hand stretches your fingers, only to gently place the book against your palm in anticipation that you will read it for her. We can expand our awareness of the untapped possibilities of electronic art by observing the signals given by a plant to a pollinating bee, and by this bee to the other bees through its accelerated wing beat. The lifelong interaction between a human and her dog is also a precious education for anyone who cares to notice its beauty, complexity, emotional charge, unpredictability and rich behavioural nuances beyond verbal languages. Rather than reiterating what we already know about point, line, and plane, electronic art can be an art of promoting contact between apparently disparate elements, expanding our awareness by revealing that what may seem distant in fact plays a direct role in our local experience. Nam June Paik pointed out Jules Henri Poincaré’s
insight that in his time we witnessed, not new things, but new relationships between what was already there. (Paik 1984: 67). In doing so, Paik echoed Moholy’s assertion: ‘Creations are valuable only when they produce new, previously unknown relationships’ (Moholy-Nagy, L. 1987: 30). It is important for art to foster the cognizance that it ought to bring in dialogic contact entities that may not seem connected. Electronic art ought to become less ‘clean’ and enable the coming together of antithetical ideas, public and private places, artificial and natural forces, organic and inorganic matter, intellect and emotion. This might imply that electronic art cannot be exclusively digital. Technology does not exist in a vacuum, and the world, with its smooth and rough surfaces, is analog. The postbiological metaphor, for example, reflects a mixture of organic analog tissue and inorganic digital components and techniques, perhaps to the point of erasure of distinctions. It is exactly as a negotiating agent between the two, in the interface between analog and digital, that the new electronic art is situated.

Electronic art is particularly well suited to bring about this change (that is, dialogic awareness) because of the very communicative potentiality of electronic media, digital and analog. Important albeit sporadic experiences in the 1960s created the precedent. It was in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, that the dialogic principle started to be addressed more directly and systematically. One of the first artworks/exhibitions to employ multiple channels of communication and to explore exchange between remote participants was ‘TransV.S.I.’ (1969), by Iain Baxter. This event was a Halifax–Vancouver connection realized via telex, telephone and fax. It took place between 15 September and 5 October 1969, between Vancouver-based Iain Baxter (a member, with Ingrid Baxter, of the ‘N.E. Thing Company’ conceptual art group) and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in Halifax, where a group of art students was coordinated by artist Gerald Ferguson. Starting in 1968, instead of using the word ‘art’ to denominate his activity, Baxter used ‘V.S.I.’, an acronym he coined for Visual Sensitivity Information. ‘TransV.S.I.’ was, therefore, the transmission of art through remote communication channels. This three-week event unfolded as Baxter transmitted instructions to the art students, who in turn executed them and transmitted back the results. Baxter sent to Halifax instructions such as ‘live in Vancouver time’, and received in exchange a diary with the record of the experience. He also instructed his remote collaborators to ‘make molds of the word MELT, freeze water, release the frozen letters, put them in the ocean, and let them melt’. The young artists followed the instructions, took photographs and sent them back. Baxter asked the
art students to ‘find a tree, paint the trunk green and paint the bow and branches brown’. Perhaps even more significant, Baxter and the Halifax group engaged in a discussion about the overall experience through the phone and the teletypewriter – arguably the most dramatic moment in this experimental dialogic work, since the discussion was not based on the execution of conceptual tasks but on an intersubjective engagement.12

Another early remote and interactive work was Robert Whitman’s ‘Children and Communication’, realized in 1971 in the context of Billy Kluter’s and Robert Rauschenberg’s E. A. T.’s ‘Projects outside Art’, a series designed to show how E. A. T. could contribute to areas of society beyond the fine arts. ‘Children and Communication’ linked children in two primary schools in New York via telephone, fax, telex and other devices. (Private email from Sue Wrbican, from Experiments in Art and Technology, Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, 23 March 1998.)

Douglas Davis, a New York-based artist, working with live broadcast and cable television created works such as his 3½-hour-long ‘Talk-Out!’ from 1972. This was a live bidirectional telecast in which callers had a conversation with Davis over the phone and on the air about what they were watching. As the programme unfolded, and phone calls started to come in, the artist interacted with viewers in real time. The dialogue could be seen by everyone watching the broadcast. A surprising moment occurred when an irate viewer yelled, ‘you don’t know what you’re doing!’ following this comment with the suggestion that an open experiment such as this would corrupt young minds. Davis and his co-host made an impromptu effort to engage in dialogue with an unidentified viewer who had a gripe with the work, thus creating one of the most fascinating moments in this dialogic project. In instances such as this, when a conversation takes unprecedented turns and participants become emotionally invested in the exchange, the dialogic principle in art manifests itself plainly.13

Also in 1972, Aaron Marcus created ‘An X on America’, a 3,000 miles wide letter X produced both as an environmental form and as a signal flow diagram through the telephone network. This piece engaged passers-by in impromptu conversations. (Soft Where, Inc. 1975: 15–18.)

While standing at one telephone booth located at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue in New York, Marcus arranged for additional telephone booths to ring in Omaha, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington, DC. ‘People walking by answered the phones and found themselves hooked into a conference call with other unknown people. We discussed art, politics, and the weather. If I wanted to draw/write a mark of that scale, where would I find enough ink/paper? The answer lay in global telecom’
Another artist who has employed the telephone in several bi-directional situations is the French artist Fred Forest. His contribution to the XII São Paulo Bienal (1973), entitled ‘Animation Presse’ (loosely translated as Press Intervention), was realized at the height of the repressive military regime’s dictatorship. It was a bank of telephones that enabled citizens to call in, ‘speak freely’ and be heard, at a time when public space and freedom of speech had been obliterated in the country. (Catalogue XII Bienal de São Paulo 1973. Pinto 1973: 30. Forest 1995: 94-5.) Forest also enabled the public to mail messages that were posted on the walls of his exhibition area. After a demonstration with blank posters on the street, another of Forest’s ‘actions’ (as ‘happenings’ were known in France) that indeed drew the attention of the press, the artist was arrested and interrogated by the political police (DOPS). He was set free after the French embassy and the organizers of the Bienal intervened.

In contrast with Forest’s activist approach, Fluxus artist Ken Friedman developed several interpersonal telephone pieces, mostly in 1967. In 1975 he created In One Year and Out the Other, a dialogical telephone event meant to evoke the idea that, magically, the interlocutors inhabited distinct zones in chronological time. Here’s the integral score for this event.

**In One Year and Out the Other**

On New Year’s Eve, make a telephone call from one time zone to another so that you are conducting a conversation between people located in two years.

Friedman first performed In One Year and Out the Other on New Year’s Eve 1975-976, calling from Springfield, Ohio forward to Dick Higgins, Christo, and Nam June Paik in New York, then back to Tom Garver and Natasha Nicholson in California. ‘I have performed this work annually since then’, explained the artist. (Private correspondence, 19 May 2003.)

Liza Bear, Willoughby Sharp, Keith Sonnier and others collaborated in 1977 to create the first live bidirectional satellite artwork, ‘Send/Receive’ or ‘Two-Way Demo’, between New York and San Francisco (simulcasted via cable in both cities) (Sharp 1980: 18–19). Absolutely new dialogic possibilities were first explored in this piece, such as the idea of the image as a meeting place in which, for example, two dancers could interact and affect one another remotely.
In 1978 Bear started to work with slow-scan television (SSTV), a device to send and receive video stills over the phone. This made communications projects more practical than with expensive live satellite links, and in the following year she realised the first SSTV project in Europe, between Milan, Arnhem and Amsterdam (Canongia 1979: 40–3).

Works like these brought Brecht’s utterances closer to our ears and elicited response. Responsibility implies both the aesthetic bidirectionality of the art experience as well as the ethical awareness of the social implications of the work. The 1980s saw the emergence of a truly international telecommunications art movement, with artists worldwide experimenting with two-way systems and network topologies often based on accessible media such as SSTV, telephones, fax and ham radio. As a result, not only countless dialogic propositions were carried out (Gidney 1986), but also the conception of network topologies was elevated to a legitimate area of artistic experimentation. This legacy finds its natural expansion on the Internet, with its listservs, MOOs and MUDs, chat sessions, videoconferences, and telepresence (that is, telerobotic) experiences.

Conclusion

Telecommunications based on the exchange of audiovisual information offers the reassurance of the remote presence of the other (via voice, video, white board, and chat). Telepresence, as it merges telecommunications media with telerobotics and remote hardware steering allows one to have a sense of one’s own presence in a remote space.

These two aesthetic principles are complementary. Dialogical telepresence events combine self and other in an ongoing interchange, dissolving the rigidity of these positions as projected remote subjects. Art both shares concerns with other disciplines and offers us cognitive models with which to reflect on social, political, emotional and philosophical aspects of life. The more electronic art learns from the fascinating and unpredictable qualities of conversational interaction – with its reciprocal rhythms, body language, speech patterns, eye contact, touch, hesitations, sudden interruptions, changes of course and continuing flow – the closer it will get to engaging us in a process of negotiation of meaning. This is the true dialogic calling of art.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. My objective is to propose the creation of art that transforms unidirectional communications systems into dialogical media. Thus, by ‘dialogical media’ I literally mean media that enable the experience of dialogical interaction in real time. (Of course, it is possible to create dialogical interaction with asynchronic systems or media, such as mail art, but my emphasis here is on synchronic interaction.) As a result, the meaning I ascribe to the word dialogical is different from the meaning assigned to it by Bakhtin, for whom a novel is a complex utterance and therefore a part of a larger dialogue. Likewise, the way I employ the word monological differs from Bakhtin’s theory. In his dialogic philosophy of language, speech is monological when it tries to suppress the multitude of voices that characterize culture and when it takes an authoritarian posture towards another discourse. While I find this sense of the word perfectly applicable to the context set by Bakhtin and his circle (that is, society at large), in my own dialogical theory of art it means modes of creation and experience that preclude real-time intersubjective engagement and response. So, for example, in my sense of the word, as usually produced, paintings, drawings, photographs and sculptures are monologic. This is so because viewers engage objects that, by definition, cannot themselves literally engage the viewer.

2. For a comprehensive survey of Clark’s work, see Lygia Clark (1997). For an account of the significance of Clark’s dialogism for electronic art, see Osthoff (1997).

3. A good example is her ‘The Crystal Quilt’ (1987), in which 430 older women sat down in groups of four to discuss aspects of their personal lives. See Lacy 1995.


5. It is worth noting that Bakhtin read Buber while a gymnasium student. See Holquist (1990: 2).

6. In her book Bakhtin and the Visual Arts, Deborah Haynes provides a clear and important discussion of Bakhtin’s aesthetics, represented by concepts such as outsideness, answerability, and unfinalisability. Haynes applies these concepts to the works of such artists as Carl Andre and Sherrie Levine. The point I wish to make is that, while Bakhtin’s ideas can be employed as metaphors in multiple contexts, they are uniquely suited in the analysis of works that actually embody these concepts in material form. My contention is that such works are to be found, not in the genres of painting and sculpture, which, as conventionally practised, are irreversibly monologic, but in the field of electronic art, particularly in interactive telecommunications works. As Haynes notes, Bakhtin does not focus on the aesthetic object or on the problem of beauty, but on ‘the phenomenology of self-other relations, relations that are embodied-in actual bodies-in space and time’. Reading Bakhtin in the context of the digital culture, one can see that dialogical aesthetics is literally manifested in interactive telecommunications works that explore the phenomenology of self-other relations in dispersed remote spaces and real time. See Haynes (1995: 5).
7. Ordinary examples of such interactions in cyberspace are MOOs, MUDs, chat rooms and avatar-based virtual communities.

8. In a phone conversation between Chicago and Buenos Aires (3 January 2002), Kosice stated that Royi (pronounced roh-gee) was ‘the first kinetic and participatory art work in the context of Latin American art’.


10. In ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’, Bakhtin states that his concept of ‘otherness’ is directly connected to the Christian worldview, which stresses ‘we must relieve the other of any burdens and take them upon ourselves’. See: Bakhtin (1990: 38). Discussing autobiographical writings, Bakhtin says that an accounting of oneself is not possible without the existence of another. For Bakhtin, any writing about the self implies an audience of higher authority: ‘Outside the bounds of trust in absolute otherness, self-consciousness and self-utterance are impossible ... because trust in God is an immanent constitutive moment of pure self-consciousness and self-expression.’ See: Bakhtin (1990: 144).

11. The point is that, in a world dominated by monological propositions, dialogical artworks are often perceived as non-art and, as a result, not relevant. Of course, monological art forms are significant in their own right. The problem lies in underestimating the significance of dialogical propositions.


13. Davis (1975: 91). The video documentation of this work is archived at the Flaxman Library, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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Lygia Clark 1997, catalogue of the homonymous exhibition organized by the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona.


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A Dialogue with an Idiot?: Some Interactive Computer-based Art

Beryl Graham

Art is essentially a conversation with the viewer, who is always reinterpreting and constructing the work of art.

(Shaw 1995: 73)

Once wrestled out of the grasp of the military, ‘new media’ such as the Internet, VR, remote sensing and digital displays were soon in the inquisitive hands of artists. Since then, artists have been pragmatically exploring the aesthetic and subversive potential of interactive video, CD-ROMs, telematics and so on, whilst museum collections become ‘virtual’, and commerce strives to sell us more ‘hands-on fun’. Advertisers and critics alike have indulged in much hyperbole concerning the ‘democratic’ potential for interactive computer-based art to escape monologic closure, and to offer a literal ‘dialogue’ between the artwork and the audience.

Working with actual new media art, it has been necessary to take a much more critical look at the range of ‘qualities of dialogue’ peculiar to the media. Whilst there has been a certain amount of writing concerning Bakhtinian perspectives on film (Flanagan 1998) or hypertext/multimedia (Eyman 1996; Merkle 1998), there has been little concerning new media artworks, despite some recurring themes of dialogue, heteroglossia, or unfinalisability. As I can by no means claim to be a Bakhtin scholar myself, these examples of art are offered up to those more expert with his tools, as an invitation to join the already heterogenous range of voices applied to new media from culture, linguistics, philosophy or science. The voice of media art is one with a strong history of reaccentuation, subversion and dialogue, and so this chapter attempts to reference less familiar artworks alongside theoretical works.

New media artists have not perhaps often been primarily or explicitly influenced by Bakhtin’s writings. The theorists most often applied to
‘new’ media tend to be the more recent commentators on media culture such as Roland Barthes’ cross-media approach, Paul Virilio’s writings on speed, or Jean Baudrillard’s post-industrial musings. Computer science-oriented fields including symbolic language, semantic webs and artificial intelligence are detailed areas of research, but are rarely applied to cultural rather than commercial production. Friedrich Kittler and others have usefully theorised the history of technology alongside the history of art, and media theorists including Lev Manovich have theorized new media art, using various starting points from pre-existing media – in Manovich’s case (2001), film and video. However, those searching for analytical tools for examining the full range of characteristics of actual new media art, must still piece together theories from these several adjoining, and sometimes mutually incomprehensible areas.

Nevertheless, Bakhtin’s nomenclatures usefully intersect with a surprising number of new media art debates that have arisen since his time. Bakhtin’s interest in novel chronotopes for example (1994) may reflect interestingly on experimental forms of discontinuous narrative using new media (Weinbren 1993; Morse 1995; Reiser and Zapp 2001). Discussions of the sexual body in virtual space (Stone 1991) or the subversions of computer hackers (Sobchack 1991) may relate to the grotesque body or the subaltern ridicule of the ‘the carnivalesque’. In the wider debate about how new media might be affecting the very social interaction upon which Bakhtinian dialogism is based, it may be that mobile phones, Internet chat-rooms and ‘online communities’ may be starting to nibble at the edges of linguistic production (Turkle 1995). It is, however, the concept of ‘dialogue’ that seems most applicable to interactive computer-based art, both in the common-language sense of a conversation between artwork and audience, and in the more Bakhtinian sense of monologic closure versus subaltern subversion (Brandist 1997).

To start with art basics, ‘new media’ may not be offering anything very new at all. Theorists such as Wooster (1991), Popper (1993), Dinkla (1996) and Kac (Chapter 10, this volume) have traced the lineage of new media art via video, kinetic, participative or surrealist art, rejecting the myth that new media have sprung fully formed from the thigh of some geek-god. More recently, curator Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) has used the phrase ‘relational aesthetics’ to describe a process-led, socially-aware approach to audience/ artwork relationships which includes both artists using new media, and a previous generation of artists (Felix Gonzalez Torres, Carsten Holfer, Douglas Gordon and Rirkrit Tiravanija, for example).

In order to progress beyond techno-utopian hype on the one hand and the ‘isn’t a painting interactive?’ question on the other, it is
necessary to briefly identify what is ‘new’ about the characteristics of new media. The range of media covered by the term are quite diverse, but the characteristics can be described in three broad groups:

1 Interaction – choice/control
This can range from simplistic button-pressing and response, to complex social interactions. Viewers can trigger different images or sounds, by clicking on or touching certain switches or ‘hot spots’. For example, in Harwood’s (1996) CD-ROM *Rehearsal of memory*, images of a body fill the screen. There are certain scars on the body, and clicking on these scars triggers voices and other images to appear on the screen, which tell the emotional story behind the scars. The viewer thus does have a ‘choice’ of which parts of the artwork to choose to see, so that with an extensive artwork, it may be that no two viewers will see exactly the same combination of images. The triggers need not be clicking or button-pressing, as computers can respond to body movement, temperature, even to smell. Interaction may be between computer and computer, between computer and human, or, as is explored later here, between human and human.

2 Communication – connecting
In addition to triggering responses, the use of telematics (videophones, Internet, video or audio streaming, email and so on) can display or exchange images, connecting areas that may be widely geographically separated. This can be ‘live’, or over a period of time, thus forming a publishing, distribution and/or broadcasting set of media. For example, Pope and Guthrie’s (1997) *Homespun* web site shows documentation of Internet exchanges between two artists staying in their parents’ houses in separate British cities, and explores ideas of ‘home’. An example of a participatory art web site is the *ArtAIDS* (1994) project, which solicited submissions from artists in different countries to email in images which could become part of a larger metaphorical ‘aids quilt’. To compare this with other artforms, there are parallels with ‘mail art’ projects that differ in connectivity terms only in the speed of communication.

3 Immersion
Viewers can explore different ‘spaces’ within three-dimensional representations. For example, in the VR artwork *World II* by Jenny Holzer (Teixeira 1995) viewers use a helmet and glove to ‘move’ their point of view through a simulation of a threatening landscape, ‘entering
buildings’ and hearing voices of dispossessed people. A sense of perceptual ‘immersion’ is offered. To compare this with other artforms, there are perhaps parallels in the ‘environments’ created by installation and site-specific artists, although in VR the space is entirely artificial and may be impossible in the physical world. The use of movement through physical space as a means of narrative has an obviously long history, from ancient dance forms or Norse Sagas to contemporary ‘quest’ computer games (Graham 2002).

These three characteristics are sometimes offered in combination. Sheldon Brown’s (1996) Mi Casa es Tu Casa, for example, created a 3-D graphic ‘house space’ designed by and for children, who were working on the project at museums in Mexico City and San Diego. The ‘house’ and the graphic characters within it could be accessed via the Internet or via physical ‘house’ installations at the museums. Participants could leave text messages for each other, interact, and adopt the image of a character drawn from Mexican and North American images, as an ‘avatar’. In the houses at the museums, the movements of the users within the space were tracked by camera, so that the computer graphic characters could respond to their presence.

It is notable that these characteristics are not necessarily tied to discrete kinds of technical media – for example, artworks on the Internet may or may not be interactive, interaction may be live or spread over time, and immersion may be physical or perceptual. It is this combination of characteristics, and the fact that the media can be a means of distribution as well as a means of production, which form the ‘new’ in terms of dialogue.

Interaction, communication and immersion are all attractive potential characteristics for artworks, but do new media really offer to replace the metaphorical dialogue between a painting its audience with a literal dialogue between new media artwork and its interactors? It is the first two characteristics, with their rhetoric of ‘choice’ and ‘democracy’ which seem to offer the most in relation to dialogue or the dialogic, and it is those which will be looked at in more detail.

Glossy – glossia

Multiple cultures or multiple viewpoints can be presented to the Virtual Museum user, instead of presenting merely one person’s (or one group’s) perception of what a politically correct, multicultural viewpoint should look like.

(Hoptman 1992: 153)
The gloss and seduction of multimedia technology have perhaps encouraged the claims that media so full of ‘choice’ might inherently enable heteroglossia. For example, on the early CD-ROM *Alice to ocean* (1993), which illustrates a journey across Australia by camel, the faces of the female traveller and the male photographer appear on the same screen. Click on him and he waxes lyrical about the light conditions of a certain day for photographing Aboriginal people. Click on her and she complains about how annoying the photographer was – being immature, and getting in the way. Such a subverting of a single authoritative voice is indeed one of the things that interactive multimedia does quite well. It is only later that one might realise that there was nowhere to click to hear the viewpoints of the Aboriginal people themselves. The ‘choice’ extolled by multimedia does often tend to be a choice of several brands of white sliced bread, without the complex contexts of true heteroglossia. Even worse, the inclusion of several alternatives is sometimes used as an excuse for avoiding difficult editorial decisions, or for denying responsibility for the authorial position (as in Hoptman’s quote). Multimedia often uses the computer metaphor of the ‘window’ (a clear view onto actuality) as opposed to acknowledging the powerful distorting lens of authorship. Our willingness to mistake a small amount of ‘choice’ for democracy or heteroglossia in multimedia programs may be due to various seductive qualities: a feeling of control, of mastery over the computer, of being ‘creative’. Sean Cubitt suggests that such choice-making tends to ‘... gratify our desire for change while assuaging our anxieties about loss and disorder’ (1992: 29).

**Whose choices?**

The word *interactive* sounds like it will alleviate the alienation of modern life by generating a dynamic alliance between artists and their audiences, joining them together in a splendid waltz that lets viewers become equal partners with artists in creating art. Yet ...

(Wooster 1991: 294)

‘Interactives’ are currently fashionable in museums and educational displays. They range from the kind of interactivity where a rat might press a button to receive a food pellet, to the kind where visitors make objects, do experiments or have interchanges with scientists or artists-in-residence. There is a similar range of levels in ‘interactive art’. Obviously the
most exciting end of the spectrum is the potential for a ‘splendid waltz’ of partnership, but sometimes the reality is rather more heavy on its feet.

Diller + Scofidio are a New York based art partnership who take the multimedia buzzword of ‘choice’ with a large dose of irony in their interactive dinner-table exhibit *Indigestion*. Entering a darkened room, the viewer can walk up to a ‘table’ which has an attached screen with buttons to touch. The viewer gets to choose the gender, masculinity/femininity, and class of the two characters whose arms appear projected down onto the ‘dinner table’. Depending on the choices, the clothes, dialogue, styles and food change (nouvelle cuisine for the upper class, steak and chips for the lower). After enjoying the wickedly witty repartee for a while, however, an interesting awareness dawns. Our ‘choices on the menu’ are actually very narrow, and we must eat what we are given. We can’t really choose our class, any more than we can change the basic ‘interactive’ plot set by the artists. Whichever character or style you choose, the plot is caught in tramlines (*a film noir* murder tale) which always move inexorably towards the same fatal conclusion. Here the artists are deliberately leading the waltz with an iron grip, and mocking our romantic dreams of being an equal creative partner.

Komar and Melamid’s artwork *The most wanted paintings* (1995) satirizes the claims that not only can the public make ‘choices’ thanks to the wonder of technology, but also they can have their choices recorded, archived and responded to in a marvelously democratic way. Not only can we vote via Internet or telephone for our favourite electoral candidate (or soap opera star), we can somehow have the Internet ‘Electronic Town Hall’ respond to our every query and desire. Our voices will be heard, our tastes will be catered for. In response to this hype, Komar and Melamid made a web site which solicited people’s votes for their favourite aspects of art, and which (via no doubt highly complex database calculations) came up with a montaged image giving the public an average of what they wanted. In America’s case, this was a medium-sized painting featuring a landscape, George Washington, and various animals. The Netherlands’ average was rather more adventurous, being a small abstract with lots of red. The end result is a web site that is amusing not only for ersatz-art and pseudo-statistics but for caricaturing the ‘focus-group’ or ‘market-led’ approach to politics and art. Of course, the artists may all the time be simply ignoring our votes and giving us what they want – we have no way of knowing.
Wooster’s opening quote about interactivity finishes thus: ‘Yet interactive videodisks do not empower the viewer to create a wholly new work with the materials they are given, and they only appear to eliminate the alienation of the artist and viewer present in most avant-garde art’ (1991: 294). With most interactive computer-based artworks, it is indeed the artist, working within the limits of the technology, who is in control of how interactive the experience really is for the audience. There is still, however, a wide range of possible levels of interactivity, and a range of tactics available to artists.

**How interactive?**

*... conversation involves negotiated meaning and common ground ...*  
(Laurel 1991: 153)

Trying to taxonomize works of art is of course a somewhat ludicrous exercise, but in the field of new media, the alternative offers much vague New Age utopianism about unspecified ‘interactives’. Part of my doctoral research (Graham 1997: 38ff) therefore involved trying to develop a workable taxonomy for interactive computer-based art. The most useful result for my purposes turned out to be a common-language metaphor of ‘conversation’, whereby the least interactive forms were likened to monologues, and the most interactive to ‘real conversation’ (see Figure 11.1).

Figure 11.1. The author’s graphic analysis of Cornock and Edmonds’ taxonomy with an added parallel using a metaphor of ‘conversation’

The taxonomy acknowledges different levels of interaction and suggests the kind of technology which might afford that level. Diller + Scofidio’s dinner table, for example, might be put in the ‘talking car’ level, because although intellectually sophisticated, they both intend simply for the audience to trigger different snippets of monologue by choosing buttons.

When it comes to the ‘most interactive’ level of ‘Real Conversation’, however, there is no example given of a kind of technology which might afford that level. ‘Real conversation’ is a complex and difficult phenomenon. Even some intelligent humans are not good at it. It is also rather difficult to define, although several theorists have attempted it. Stone, for example, examines Andy Lippman’s definition of interaction as ‘mutual and simultaneous activity on the part of both participants’ in specifically conversational terms, describing some of his corollaries to
Figure 11.1. The author’s graphic analysis of Cornock and Edmonds’ taxonomy with an added parallel using a metaphor of ‘conversation’
the definition in this way:

One is mutual interruptibility, which means that each participant must be able to interrupt the other, mutually and simultaneously. Interaction, therefore, implies conversation, a complex back-and-forth exchange, the goal of which may change as the conversation unfolds. The second is graceful degradation, which means that unanswerable questions must be handled in a way that doesn’t halt the conversation ... The third is limited look-ahead, which means that because both parties can be interrupted there is a limit to how much the shape of the conversation can be anticipated by either party. The fourth is no-default, which means that the conversation must not have a preplanned path; it must develop fully in the interaction.

(Stone 1995: 10f)

If a metaphor of conversation is to be used to examine the relationship between an interactive computer-based artwork and its audience, then the question has to be asked, what kind of a dialogue is it?

The Canadian artist Luc Courchesne (1999) has made a series of pieces based around a literal idea of a ‘conversation’ between the user and the programmed artwork. Portrait one involved a simple computer screen interface with a head and shoulders video shot of a character, and Salon of shadows was a more complex, atmospheric installation involving four ‘characters’ projected onto semi-reflective glass to rather ghostly effect. The viewer can touch/ click one of several questions/ phrases at the bottom of the screen (such as ‘are you staring at me?’ or ‘sometimes I dream’), and the character responds appropriately with a short (about five seconds) video clip of monologue. The characters and scripts have some diversity, and the actors are good. There is cause and effect in that if you consistently choose the more hostile options the character withdraws, and if you are quirky, so are they. What this doesn’t seem like, however, is a conversation. Obviously, your choices are limited, and equally obviously, the program cannot respond to you as a person: a young female character flirts in a philosophical manner, whilst the male characters were unfortunately provided with no chat-up lines from the viewer. The computer had all the best lines; the viewer had no real voice – an asymmetrical interaction where words were put into the viewer’s mouth. The ghostly effect of Salon of shadows reinforces an eerie lack of the presence of the human, and the characters refer to their own existential crisis. When computer programs attempt ‘conversation’, it often serves to underline how complex and elusive real conversation is.
A dialogue with an idiot?

The automaton is the analogy of man and remains his interlocutor (they play chess together!). The machine is man’s equivalent and annexes him to itself in the unity of its operational process.

(Baudrillard 1991: 178)

Computers can be very good at chess. Chess however has more rules and fewer variables than verbal conversation. The Turing Test, an old but enduring acid test for the much-heralded ‘Artificial Intelligence’ of computers, is a test based on ‘conversation’. The Loebner Prize Competition (Powers 1998) is based on this test, and if a human judge is unable to distinguish between a human and a computer program, during a typed ‘conversation’ with an unseen interlocutor, then the computer program is deemed to have achieved Artificial Intelligence. The competition occurs every year, and so far no program has succeeded, however clever the human programmers. The transcripts of the dialogues show various cunning attempts which hold up for a few exchanges of pleasantries, before something goes suspiciously awry. Often, it is the failure to pick up and develop subjects introduced by the human interlocutor which gives the game away, and the programs could really only be mistaken for humans of the most boorish or deranged kind.

Computer programs can participate in games with firm rules, or exchanges that are formulaic (like the many versions of a jokey ‘computer psychoanalyst’ program which responds ‘so, how did that make you feel?’ or similar feedback cliches, when human problems are typed in). Once given specific parameters, they are also good at ‘modelling’, for example, estimating the population fluctuations of a set of Galapagos Finches over hundreds of years given certain predation rates, food availability, tidal waves and so on. Artists including Jane Prophet have used such programs to create ‘evolutionary art systems’ like Technosphere (Hurry et al. 2000). In Technosphere, participants can create images of strange creatures, that they then ‘release’ into a programmed world in which they can fight, breed, evolve, survive or die, depending on how well the creature is designed for its surroundings. Here the artist is creating a world, making the rules, inviting others in, and letting the computer program take it from there. The computer elaborates the events through time, and will go on doing it until it is stopped. The artist Lisa Jevbratt (2003) has worked in a sophisticated way with the logarithmic nature of computer programmes by setting up software
that satirises software itself. The artwork 1:1, for example, sets itself
the quixotic task of mapping the vast sea of data which is the Internet.
Each tiny pixel of colour represents a numerical address of a web site,
and clicking on a pixel takes you to that site, or reveals the dead links
which have sunk without trace in the flux of information. Here
computer is talking unto computer; an evolving, but ultimately doomed
dialogue.

From these examples it can be seen that, once programmed by
humans, computers can play games, model simple consequences for set
parameters, and exchange formulaic sentences. What computers can’t
do, whether working with words or images, is the ‘mutual exchange ...
elaborately related’ of conversation (Figure 11.1), which builds meaning
or linguistic change. Due to the non-arrival of Artificial Intelligence, it
seems unlikely that technology will be able to offer ‘real conversation’
in the near future. However much we desire an automaton playmate, it
seems that humans will have to continue to adapt themselves to the
shortcomings of computers. Computer programs cannot offer conven-
tional ‘conversation’, nor, very obviously, Bakhtinian dialogism, for
both demand a genuine exchange and elaboration of ideas, with mutual
interruptibility. If artworks using computer programs are to be judged as
conversationalists, then they are the kinds who tend to be desperately
avoided at parties.

The author as hero, or the author as party host?

It has been claimed that Lady Lovelace outlined the two basic ideas
behind computer programming: “repetition of routines and condi-
tional transfer of control.”

(Cornwell [quoting Beardsley] 1993: 41)

As Ada Lovelace discovered in the 19th century, conditional transfer of
control is important in computer programs. It is also important to art-
works and audiences. As Roland Barthes (1997: 142ff) pointed out, due to
‘The death of the author’ all authors/ artists relinquish some control to
their readers/ audience. Authors of interactive computer-based artworks
must in addition make decisions as to exactly how much control of phys-
ical viewing and participation they will hand to their audience. Some
artists have chosen to work around the problem of the inherently poor
conversational skills of computers by encouraging conversation between
audience members rather than solely between artwork and audience.
Toshio Iwai’s *Resonance of four* (1994) is an elegant art ‘game’ designed for four users. In a darkened room, four grids are projected onto the floor, and each grid has a podium next to it, on which is a computer mouse. By clicking with the mouse, coloured squares are formed on the grid, and the squares make notes (discovering how it works is very intuitive). Each grid is a different ‘musical instrument’, and the pleasure of the piece lies in how well the four participants can co-operate (via sound and/or vision). The piece is very carefully programmed in tempo and tone, so that even those without musical knowledge don’t sound too bad together. Here the artist is being a skillful but modest party host – providing some helpful structure for the inept, and making a protective space where users can interact gracefully with strangers (even reserved Japanese or Northern Europeans!). Once the artwork is made, he hands it over to his guests (the audience) without whom there is no party. A certain simple level of interaction is available between the artwork and audience (‘reciprocal’ or ‘voicemail’), but a higher level (‘real conversation’, ‘mutual exchange ... elaborately related’) can go on between the audience members. Programmed interactive artworks may make for boorish party guests, but they are not bad party hosts. By avoiding words, they can even host a party for an international audience.

Here the artist is still acknowledging authorship of the artwork, and enjoying some skill and control, but is rather a retiring hero of the story, who also allows his audience some control, creative input, and ‘the pleasures of connoisseurship and expertise’ (Weinbren 1993: 403). Computer technology may be poor at conversation but can offer this kind of facility with ease – a fact that was noticed some time ago by commercial games manufacturers such as Nintendo, although with an emphasis on competition rather than collaboration.

Recycle, reaccentuate

Toshio Iwai’s artwork enables people to ‘converse’ with each other in the same time and space, but as Finn Bostad points out in this book, various technologies and structures also enable us to converse at different times, in different spaces or any combination of the above. Many artists have used Internet and email technologies to experiment with means of participation by the audience (who may be widely geographically separated). The *ArtAIDS* (1994) project already mentioned, for example, includes a ‘Derivatives’ section where one artist may start an image, and pass it on to another artist to elaborate, and so forth, rather like a visual version of the old ‘exquisite corpse’ game which Denning and Ficara
(2000) have reworked. Amy Alexander’s (1996) *Multi-cultural recycler* website takes images from ‘web-cams’ (video cameras playing live on the Internet) of your choice from around the world, and recycles them by distortion and collage into a new image, before your very eyes.

Here, the new media are enabling faster exchange and more easily manipulable media, wherein someone else’s image or sound can be easily copied, changed, sampled, distorted, merged with other media, reaccentuated and fed back – features which interest artists, copyright lawyers, and may well have interested Bakhtin. Internet artists such as the group *eToy* (1994) have gained much publicity from their Internet-based activities which adopt and subvert the dominant forms of ‘e-commerce’ (advertising and selling on the Internet). The ensuing litigation and territorial struggles over ‘domain name’ or Internet address with the commercial organisation eToys (with the address etoys.com rather than etoy.com) is rather reminiscent of ancient wars over land, flags, the word of god, or the naming of nations. Similarly, the activist group *La Fiambrera* (2000–) have used the manipulating ability of new media to scan images, and re-purpose them to street-level activism against gentrification in Seville. Hence, development corporation posters re-appear with very different texts on them, and with holes cut out so that passers-by can insert their heads and have their photographs taken, subverting the usual tourist photo-opportunity.

Whatever the powers of new media to offer possible ‘reaccentuation’ of images and sounds as well as language, or to engage in struggle with some multinational companies, there is an overwhelming problem in considering new media as a site of Bakhtinian dialogism. Computer technology is obviously anything but subaltern. It is essential to maintaining existing power structures, and the hardware and software industries, despite New Age rhetoric, are some of the most exploitative, monopolising, and globalising institutions on the planet. Despite the ‘global village’ rhetoric of the Internet, it effectively belongs to those with the money, the technology, the means of production, the education and the dominant language (English). The Internet, by effectively allowing much ‘self-publishing’, allows a certain carnivalesque diversity of views and quality, but it is a carnival with a rather prohibitive entrance fee. This entrance fee keeps out those who might make it a real event.

Some artists are very well aware that computers are idiots, but many (especially Internet artists) are happy to play with, subvert, recycle and satirize such interestingly idiotic conversationalists. Artists may even discover ways in which computers can be made less boorish. Some
artists have decided that new media art is perhaps ‘most interactive’ when the artists are facilitating real dialogue between real people by being ‘party hosts’. Speaker’s Corner (De Jonge, 2000–) for example, places a digital red text display on the outside of the Media Centre in Huddersfield, and enables the public to place text messages on the display from an on-site free phone kiosk, from mobile phones, or from the Internet. Texts appearing on the site have ranged from free-form dating, dialogues, or cheerful rudeness, to commissioned text-message poetry competitions, and theatrical narratives.

The site of real dialogue and dialogism rests, as ever, not in the interaction between human and computer, but between human and human. The new media may facilitate this in different styles, at different speeds and in different ways, but may not be changing the existing power structures. Likewise, new media in general could only claim to be involved with ‘the dialogic’ if they are facilitating subaltern subversion or reaccentuation of the ‘language’ of media. It tends to be where new media art is informed by its net activist roots, or by a desire to ‘host’ a dialogue between people, that such art most nearly approaches Baktinian dialogism.

Note
1. The term ‘new media’ is a rather undefined one, and tends to refer to all digital (rather than analogue) media introduced in the late 20th century, including digital text, sound, still images, and video, which may be experienced on computers, digital televisions, projected images, VR helmets, videophones and so on, and may be distributed by the Internet, telephonic communication, or broadcast media. What is being discussed here in particular is ‘interactive computer-based art’ using the interactive forms of these technologies: primarily CD-ROMs, the Internet, and interactive installations which combine real objects with computer-controlled images.
2. VR stands for ‘virtual reality’ – a means of presenting computer graphics so that the user gains the impression of moving within a three-dimensional space. The user often wears a helmet which presents 3-D image and sound, and tracks head movements so that the user can look in any direction within the ‘space’. Both VR and the Internet were initially designed for military use.

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