

On Dialogism and Scientifically Disciplined Discourse- and Conversation Analysis

Ragnar Rommetveit⁸

Translated by Karin Lee-Hansen

Introduction

In monologically-based communication theory inspired by information technology, the relationship between what is subjectively and collectively meaningful has remained a ‘taboo topic’ in a no-man’s-land between narrow individualistic psychological theory and abstract systems theory. Pioneers in the development of a dialogical paradigm are broad-minded thinkers who dare to set out on a journey of discovery in this area, being free of established prejudices regarding boundaries between what is subjectively, intersubjectively and collectively meaningful. The essence of the dialogical paradigm is the individual as co-owner of the language as a collectively constituted resource; co-authorship of linguistically mediated meaning and sharing of epistemological responsibility. Dialogical-based communication science: Is it “a moral science”?

As a child I sometimes sneaked up to the balcony of the youth club at home, often when there were raucous parties taking place down below, but also, and especially during the wintertime, when ardent lay preachers came to our rural

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area in order to convert sinners into pursuing new and better lives. Since I, after having led an academic life for fifty years with its ban on preaching, have to admit that I have envied them quite a bit, I will in this article allow myself the freedom to intertwine a touch of preaching in my reflections upon the mystery of the language and mind. In fact, I can imagine the following subtitle: “A Gospel on Dialogue as a Fundamental Form of Human Communication and Man as a Dialogically Constituted Being”.

But – unlike those ardent lay preachers – I feel obliged to *practice* dialogism. I invite my readers to discuss the questions I raise, fully conscious of the fact that my answers to the questions are not the final answers, but rather invitations to my readers to take part in a dialogue. And the central issues in this “dialogue about dialogue” are as follows:

- What is meant by the expression “dialogism” as it is currently used and interpreted by spokespersons for a so-called dialogically-based paradigm within psychological, social, interdisciplinary and humanistically-oriented communication research?
- How is the dialogical paradigm (or perspective) distinguished from traditional, monologically-based communication theory?
- What implications does a dialogically based and systematically grounded fundamental view on language, thinking and communication have for empirical discourse- and conversation analysis?

The questions above have been pondered by an international and interdisciplinary research group which has met twice annually in Bad Homburg, Germany, over a period of six years. Our aim was to search for a unified foundation for our communication studies. We came from different research fields; from linguistics, psychology and sociology. What united us was a wondering about fundamental problems across established boundaries between academic disciplines; a wondering about *the dialogical nature of the individual psyche, the relationship between the individual mind and the cultural collective and about the human being’s culturally appropriated “social nature”*⁹.

9. The written product of these collaborative discussions in Bad Homburg includes four anthologies dealing with various aspects of dialogically-based communication theory and empirical discourse analysis (Marková & Foppa, 1990; 1991; Marková, Graumann & Foppa, 1995; Bergmann & Linell, 1998). Furthermore, for readers who truly wish to expand their knowledge of dialogically-based communication theory and discourse and conversation analysis, I have a very good advice: Read Per Linell’s book *Approaching Dialogue: Talk, Interaction and Contexts in Dialogical Perspectives* (Linell, 1998).

A sermon on dialogism must, as all other sermons, be based on authoritative texts. Today's text is not one, but several texts, namely a handful of cryptic and in part polemic statements that I intend to interpret as fragments of a draft for an interdisciplinary oriented and general theory on the dialogue as a fundamental form of communication. The authors I will quote are to a certain extent "Old Testament Prophets", in other words thinkers who thought of dialogism before the expression "dialogism" became popular and used as a label in the debate about human communication. Others are "New Testament Evangelists", modern-day researchers from various fields and academic traditions who are actively involved in a joint project aimed at the development of a dialogical alternative to the reigning cognitive, individualistic and monologically-based theories of language, thought and communication.

Today's "excerpts from the Old Testaments" have been written by the Russian Orthodox Prophets Mikhail Bakhtin, Valentin Vološinov and Lev Vygotsky, the Continental European philosophers Martin Buber and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the famous American scholars William James and George Herbert Mead. With respect to the "New Testament excerpts", I have selected certain statements made by "the grand old man" of American cognitive psychology, Jerome Bruner, from Vygotsky- and Bakhtin interpreter James V. Wertsch, from the Swedish social psychologist Johan Asplund, and finally from the English social psychologist Michael Billig, who has expressed his dialogical perspective in thought-provoking analyses of the discussions and gossip surrounding the British royal house.

Today's text(s)

Bakhtin writes (1981:293):

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.

Moreover (1984:202):

The life of a word is contained in its transfer 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.

Next, Vološinov supplements Bakhtin's thinking in the following manner (1973:11 and 86):

Consciousness becomes consciousness [...] only in the process of social interaction. Individual consciousness is [...] a tenant lodging in the social edifice of ideological signs.

[...] *a word is a two-sided act*. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant.

And Vygotsky, the developmental psychologist among the Russian dialogism prophets, claims (Vygotsky, 1979:30 and 1981:163):

[...] the social dimension of consciousness is primary in time and in fact. The individual dimension is derivative and secondary.

Any function of the child's cultural development appears twice. First, it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category [...] internalization transforms the process itself and changes its structure and functions.

What follows are a few quotations from William James and George Herbert Mead. James states the following about people's conversations with one another (James, 1962:197):

You accept my verification of one thing. I yours of another. We trade on each other's truth.

In accordance with this thinking, George Herbert Mead (1934:11 and 223) writes:

[...] it is a mistake that all we can call thought can be located in the organism or put in the head.

[...] The individual mind's field or locus is co-extensive with its social activity or apparatus of social relations.

In the Continental European "Old Testament" texts, dialogism is proclaimed with existential-philosophical pathos. For instance, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975:282 and 360) writes:

Arriving at the same meaning [...] is in truth an infinite process.

[...] language [...] is not a piece of property at the disposal of one or the other conversational partner.¹⁰

And Martin Buber condenses his view of dialogism and human identity in the following manner (Buber, 1958: 8 and 32):

There is no I in isolation, only the I in the basic word pair I-You and the I in the basic word pair I-It.

A human being becomes an I in relation to a You.¹¹

The most enthusiastic of the “New Testament” evangelists is probably the incredibly vital more than ninety years old Jerome Bruner. He writes about the cultural-psychological, dialogical counter-revolution against the dominant information-technology inspired cognitivism (Bruner, 1990: xi, 33 and 118):

[...] the great psychological questions are raised once again – questions about the nature of mind and its processes, questions about how we construct our meaning and our realities, questions about shaping of mind by history and culture.

[...] culture is constitutive of the mind.

While James Wertsch does not preach to the same extent as Bruner in his interpretation and development of the conceptions inherited from Vygotsky and Bakhtin, he is as stringent as Bruner in his critique of “the American psychology of the individual organism”. Regarding his own dialogical-based program for sociocultural studies, Wertsch writes the following (1991:14):

[...] mind is viewed [...] as something that “extends beyond the skin”

Similarly, the Swedish social psychologist Johan Asplund writes in his book *The Social Life's Elementary Forms* (1987:30):

[...] it is precisely in our social responsiveness that we develop our individuality.

And allow me to conclude this textual reading with a provocative contribution from the discourse researcher Michael Billig, who writes the following (1987:11):

[...] humans do not converse because they have inner thoughts to express, but they have thoughts because they are able to converse.

10. Die Ausschöpfung des wahren Sinnes [...] ist in Wahrheit ein unendlicher Prozeß. [...] die Sprache [...] ist kein verfügbarer Besitz des einen oder des anderen der Gesprächspartner.

11. Es gibt kein Ich an sich, sondern nur das Ich des Grundworts Ich-Du und das Ich des Grundworts Ich-Es. Der Mensch wird am Du zum Ich.

Exegesis

Is it at all possible to interpret these textual excerpts as fragments of a comprehensive program for the exploration of the mystery of language and mind, as subcomponents in a preliminary theory of dialogue as the core of historical and ontogenetic development, and even as a program with practical implications for empirical discourse and conversation analysis?

This is not easy. A critical philosopher would rightly claim that today's texts comprise a mixture of ontology, epistemology and *potentially* empirically verifiable claims with a strong element of rhetoric. However, let me try to gather the threads from these texts into a programmatic outline for interdisciplinary, humanistic research. In doing so, I will concentrate on three mutually related topics:

First, there is the dialogical (or dialectical) view of the relationship between language and thinking. Secondly, there is communication – written discourse and conversation – as a joint project between participants. Thirdly, there is the dialogue as a bridge from the individual mind into a linguistic-cultural collective.

Vološinov claims that our “consciousness” *comes into existence* in social interaction, and that an expression is a two-sided action with a meaning that is equally divided between the person expressing something and the person to whom something is expressed. William James says that conversation partners “trade on each other's truths”; while Michael Billig dares to make the statement that we do not converse because we have inner thoughts. We have thoughts because we are able to converse.

In my view, these texts converge in a *radical* dialogically-based view on the relationship between language and thought: Our thinking has the dialogue as a *prerequisite*, and language is therefore not merely a “midwife” for thought. When I search for a word for something I believe I know, but do not find the word for, this “wordless, inner” becomes *consummated* as a thought or a meaning I also can pass on to other people. Or, as Gadamer expresses: What is being “brought into the language” will somehow get its identity from the words we use in our description of it.

Hereby we are in the middle of the second topic, namely language communication as a collaborative project, the inherent addressivity in our speech and thought. The moment we become involved in a conversation with another person, the boundaries of our psyche do not go along our skin. Wertsch and Mead describe this phenomenon in the following manner: “[The psyche] reaches fur-

ther than that, our mental action radius reaches as far as our social engagement or apparatus for social relations”.

Let me at this point make a small digression and comment upon a recent presentation of *metaphor use of the language* as an argument for the dialogical paradigm in recent times. Vygotsky often characterized language as a mental tool. Bruner asks us to imagine language as a kind of prosthesis, “a prosthetic device”: In principle in the same way as a prosthetically applied cane expands a blind man’s tactile experience of a room, language expands our mental radius. But let me add to these remarks by Vygotsky and Bruner some reservations and supplementary comments.

While the cane makes the blind *more independent*, language makes us *more dependent on others*. As Gadamer expresses: The language belongs to everyone and is no single communication partner’s property. In financial, capitalistic jargon: *We all have shares in, but none of us is a majority shareholder in the language*. A major flaw with both the prosthesis- and stockholder metaphors is that none of them capture the fact that language, when we have acquired it, in a way functions as an almost completely automatic component of our mental activity. It is by no means “a prosthetic device” we can remove. The mind that expands through language is *a linguistically infiltrated, qualitatively changed mind*.

This is a major point in Vygotsky’s dialogical developmental psychology: Internationalization of language – our “inner speech” – leads to a transformation of our mental structures and functions. Furthermore, this transformation is an irreversible process. Once we have acquired our native language, we are somehow trapped within it. For this reason, our intuitively mastered language comprehension cannot be placed in any of the two cognitive scientific categories; “the cognitively penetrable functions” or “the functional architecture”, into which Zenon Pylyshyn (1980) divides our mental functions. The cognitively penetrable functions are influenced by such factors as “goals, beliefs, tacit knowledge” etc., and they are in principle available for reflective, voluntary control. The functional architecture, on the other hand, is characterized by a determinism and automation we only find in causal biological or physical processes, not in human rationality and intentionality.

Our spontaneous language comprehension must, according to this, be characterized as *cognitively penetrated*, that is, infiltrated by cognitive categorizations and comprehensive forms we have made our own, given the fact that we have acquired our native language, but simultaneously made it *cognitively impenetrable* in the sense that it is as unavailable for reflective, voluntary control as are

physical hormonal processes. None of us can, no matter how hard we try, hear a Norwegian expression or a single Norwegian word as a completely meaningless sound sequence. The language, the bridge from the subjective to the potentially intersubjective and collective has become a part of our “functional architecture” and, as Benveniste, Buber and Gadamer claim, part of our human identity and “nature”.

How can we claim that conversation is a collaborative project? Vološinov claims that the one *meant for* an utterance, is a co-producer of the meaning of the utterance. For those who are indoctrinated in monological mentality, this type of claim is absurd. Nonetheless, I dare claim that in many situations each and every one of us actually uses words in the unreflected belief that our conversation partner masters the meaning of those words *better* than we do ourselves. For my part, I am convinced that this is the case when I have brought my car to the repair shop and talk about what is under the hood, in order to tell the car mechanic what I think is wrong with the engine. This kind of asymmetry is a prevalent theme in dialogically-based analyses of conversations between the learned and unlearned (Marková & Foppa, 1991). William James would perhaps remark on this asymmetry by saying that “the lay person trades *unilaterally* on the professional’s or expert’s truth”.

When we – something we often *must* do in scientifically reflected and disciplined discussion of the mental and meaningful – use broad expressions such as “in”, “within”, etc., we are speaking in metaphors of a completely different sort than the concrete physical-geographical space in which we are wandering. Of course, it is important to remember what Charles Hockett points out in his essay *The Problems of Universals in Language* (1963), about the purely physically defined common “here-and-now” as being a universal “niche” in the evolution of “animal symbolism”. However, a point equally important and valid is Ernst Cassirer’s (1944) claim that the language in historic time is the most genuinely humane of man: that it liberates us from our prison in physically defined time and space, leading us into a life filled with meaningful memories about our common past, notions of far-off things and events as well as expectations regarding the future.

When we reflect upon *the distance between dialogue partners* in discourse- and conversation analysis, this distance measured in meters may at times also be interesting to calculate. But if the dimension we have in mind in attempts to map out the distance in linguistically mediated meaning, we know that no matter how difficult it would be to capture this dimension in a precise network

of concepts; it serves as parameter in a time-and-space-universe where we must use quite other aids than the clock and the meter-stick in our search for scientifically documented insight.

In this abstract, metaphorical space there are no clear boundaries between the *subjective*, the *intersubjective* and the *collectively* meaningful. It is in this space that the word on its wandering from generation to generation is not quite able to and liberate itself from old contexts, and *this is where we hold – and analyse – conversations*. For example, when we talk about conversation, love or animosity *between* two persons, we discuss phenomena that can neither be located inside nor outside two human bodies. And when we spontaneously use expressions such as “Platonic love” and ‘lusts of the flesh’, in individual and original expressions regarding sexual morality, it is indeed Plato and Paul who are co-authors of the meaning in our assertions; also when these expressions must be interpreted as contradictions to Plato and Paul. In family life and dialogue with adults the growing individual little by little enters into the dialogue with the fragments of the common cultural heritage that the parent generation carries with them from earlier generations. It is in this linguistically expanded, abstract, semantic space that Bruner places the mind when he claims that “culture is constitutive of the mind”.

On own account, I will add that previous twenty years of research on prelinguistic communication between infants and adult caregivers may be read as a fascinating and thorough scientifically documented story of the very first phase in the development and transformation of a new-born, socially responsive, biological organism into a speaking and thinking person with a dialogically and culturally constituted identity (Rommetveit, 1998). Researchers such as Stein Bråten (1992) and Colwyn Trevarthen (1992) claim that the dialogism within us is congenital. Moreover, about the very first prelinguistic dialogue flowing into adult mastery of language, they use expressions such as “communication within the mode of felt immediacy” and “primary intersubjectivity”. As a title for a report on their joint findings, Bråten and Trevarthen or any other prominent infant and toddler researchers, could use Buber’s poetically formulated philosophical statement: “The Human Being Becomes an I in Relation to a You”.

On cognitive versus dialogical language- and communication theory

After this tedious exegesis, I think it is possible to give a relatively brief and concise outline of the major distinctions between the dialogical paradigm and

cognitive, monologically based communication theory. True enough, I admit that my presentation of cognitive theory is incomplete and to some extent caricatured. My assertion – which I will document – is nonetheless that most theoretical models of language communication within current cognitive science, individually-based cognitive psychology and social psychology as well as American psycholinguistics are more or less sophisticated variations of an information-transport-model. Here the utterance (both spoken and written) is portrayed as a kind of conductor carrying mental content from a transmitter to a receiver. This is the essence of what the American linguist Michael Reddy calls “the conduit paradigm of communication”.

Some of the most sophisticated variations of this general conduit model are formulated in formal logical and information-technology inspired terminology. However, according to Reddy (1979) this thinking is completely in line with laypeople’s ideas regarding language communication of meaning. He claims that approximately seventy percent of all popular English metalinguistic words, that is seventy percent of laypeople’s words *about* words and expressions may be interpreted as manifestations of an idea about language as a kind of transport system. In cognitive- revolutionary psycholinguistics and text linguistics of the 1960s, it was often talk about “the propositional content” or “propositional information” in freestanding sentences or texts. Lyons (1977:724) writes about “the transport model” in relation to communication of propositional information:

[...] the process of communicating propositional information is readily describable [...] in terms of a journey: if X communicates *p* to Y, this implies that *p* travels, in some sense, from X to Y. [...] It may be suggested that “*p* is at X” (where X is a person) is the underlying location structure that is common to “X knows *p*”, “X believes *p*”, “X has *p* in mind”, etc.

In the psycholinguistics Noam Chomsky and George A. Miller laid the foundation for, “the atomic unit” was the core sentence (Miller, 1962), that is, the stipulated, complete communication of a freestanding core statement (a “proposition”) *p*. The point of departure for scientifically disciplined reflection on language mediation of meaning in dialogically-based conversation analysis, on the other hand, is not such an idealized “system sentence” (Lyons, 1977), but rather the unusually cryptic expression that – as Lev Vygotsky (1986) states – leads to “complete comprehension” in a given context. Thus, the “canonical expression” in such an analysis is not *the assertion* but *the answer* (Rommetveit, 1990). Expressions in the form of assertions have an (often implicit) built-in addressivity, are inserted in more comprehensive chains of communication, and are *meaningful*

only in the sense that they can be interpreted as (contributions to) answer to one or another question.

In John Searle's theory on speech acts (1974), the speaker is an autonomous player and the sole author of the expression, and, states Searle (1979:12):

Utterance meaning – whether indirect, metaphorical, or ironical – is in every case arrived at by going through literal sentence meaning.

On the other hand, Paul Grice (1975) points out in his “maxims of conversation” that conversation seems to be charted as a kind of collaborative project. However, referring to the word “say”, Grice (1975:44) writes that “[...] one would know something about what the speaker had said, *on the assumption that he was speaking [...] literally*” (my italics). So when we read Grice's discussion of his own theoretical premises on the topic, it becomes – in spite of several serious reservations – suspiciously similar to the presentation by John Lyons on the essence of the transport system paradigm in the study of language communicated meaning. While there is admittedly no mention of *transport of assertions* in Grice's presentation, but of transport (and modification) of *individual psychological states* (Grice, 1981:227):

[...] a certain psychological state *psi1* [...] is followed by a certain utterance U [...] which in turn [...] is followed by a particular instance of a further psychological state *psi2*, a state not now in the communicating creature but in the creature who is communicated to. And it might be a matter of desirability for *psi1* and *psi2* to be states of one and the same, rather than different sorts, so that when these sequences *psi1*, U, *psi2* occur, they involve utterances and psychological states between which these psycholinguistic correspondences obtain.

In my opinion, Searle and Grice represent cognitive-psychological sophisticated variations of monologically-based communication theory. In their discussions of “utterance meaning”, both postulate “literal sentence meaning” as a common foundation in the listener's and speaker's line of reasoning *from* what is said in a given context to what is meant (or communicated) with the utterance, and vice versa. I would therefore claim that they accept “the myth of literal meaning” (Rommetveit, 1988) as an axiom in discourse- and conversation analysis. The addressee is awarded status as “the creature who is communicated to”, and not the potential co-author of the meaning of the utterance. My provocative assertion is therefore that Searle and Grice are caught in a kind of solipsist mentalism of the same sort as Chomsky (before he became a neuroscientist!)

clearly made known in his redefinition of linguistics as (a branch of) cognitive individual psychology.

Searle understands the theory of speech acts as an extension of Frege's semantic analysis, and his implicit communication ethics are camouflaged in "the principle of expressibility". This is in principle a postulate, namely that for every single individually intended meaning there is an utterance that communicates this exactly. Therefore, claims Searle (1974: 21), are "[...] nonliteralness, ambiguity and incompleteness [...] not theoretically essential to linguistic communication". Searle is quite right in claiming this regarding discourse *about* and *in* an ideal world, a completely unambiguous and transparent "objective world". In such a world, where in principle everything that happens may be precisely categorized as *sub specie aeternitatis*, and everyone are "speaking literally" (Grice) about what is taking place; if this were the case, then the completely authentic utterance would thereby per definition also fulfil the requirement regarding true and correct use of language. Hereby, I would claim that we have entered into a seductive aspect of monologically-based discourse- and conversation theory: that postulates about "literal meaning" is smuggled in from prestigious normative-formal-logical philosophical traditions and – most often in far more effective camouflage than in Searle's theory on speech acts – accepted as a necessary guarantee for scientific insight into communication of meaning as *a rational activity*.

In Grice's conversation maxims this normative element is explicit in the sense that the requirement of individual, instrumental rationality is formulated as a directive: The conversation partner *should* (as speaker) formulate the contribution to the conversation so that the other (the listener) would be able to "compute implicatures", that is, from contextual knowledge and mutual goal-setting for "the exchange of information" be able to deduce logically what is implicitly or indirectly intended in what is "literally being said" (Grice, 1975; 1981). On the other hand, Herbert Clark writes in his version of the theory of speech acts that instrumental rationality is not formulated as an imperative to conversation partners, but rather *postulated as a necessary condition for scientifically disciplined insight into (or rational, scientific reconstruction of) their conversation*. Of course, the conversation is designed as collaboration ("joint actions" and "joint projects"), and each contribution to the conversation is divided into two phases. However, regarding what he calls "the presentation phase" and "the acceptance phase", Clark writes the following (Clark, 1996: 227):

Presentation phase: A presents a signal *s* for B to understand. He assumes that if B gives evidence *e* or more, he can believe that B understands what he means by it.

Acceptance phase: B accepts A's signal *s* by giving evidence *e* that she believes that she understands what A means by it. She assumes that once A registers *e*, he too will believe she understands.

In this two-phase sequence, *B* is – in what may be identified as an authorship of signals – *not co-author of the “s” signal*. Each utterance is interpreted as an *individually composed contribution* (or signal). But, as in all cognitivist variations of American psychology of the individual organism, both conversation partners are equipped with “beliefs” about the other’s “beliefs”, and with impressive logical capacity. The postulate on rationally calculated conversion of meaning to speech sound sequences and vice versa is supplemented with *a postulate on the calculation of the conversation partner’s calculation*. This meta-communicative element in the theory on conversation as a collaborative project is found in Clark, Schreuder and Buttrick’s “optimal design for demonstrative reference” formulated as follows (Clark, Schreuder & Buttrick, 1983:246):

The speaker designs his utterance in such a way that he has good reason to believe that the addressees can readily and uniquely compute what is meant on the basis of the utterance along with the rest of their common ground.

Instrumentally rational coordination of individual contributions (“joint activity”) therefore becomes in Clark’s theoretical model a product of “calculating” the implications of one’s own and the other’s “signal”.

“Signal” is one of the words that have survived the transition from behaviourism to cognitivism in American individual psychology. The fact that it has status as a scientific term in Pavlov’s reflexology and information-technology inspired communication theory appears to have strengthened the belief in accumulation of psychological knowledge comprising more than the suspicion of polysemy in psychological terminology. In contrast, the word “understand” is virtually characterized as a taboo in all varieties of scientific psychology of the individual organism. For example, in James Deese’s theory of associative meaning, the *understanding* (of a “stimulus word”) is formulated in the following manner (Deese, 1962: 164): “[...] the stimulus word elicits itself as a representational response”. Therefore, Clark’s formulation “A presents a signal for B to understand” appears to reflect an interesting ambivalence (in a purely terminological sense).

By calling an utterance a “signal”, Clark indirectly characterizes his own position (as researcher) as a *distanced observer*. Moreover, by frequently using the word “understand”, he indicates (in contrast to James Deese) a *participatory*

position. Thus, his terminology indicates an epistemological ambivalence and/or eclecticism; a position that neither can be unambiguously characterized as being (orthodox) cognitive nor hermeneutic-dialogical. However, the distinction between the two positions is greater – and far more significant – than the difference in terminology. The paradigmatic distinction concerns alternative perspectives on linguistically mediation of meaning. The choice is between discourse- and conversation analysis as a science on linguistically mediation of meaning via *bilateral, dialogically constituted utterances* or as a science on communication via *unilateral, individually composed “signals”*.

My conclusion is therefore that Herbert Clark’s theory of conversation is also an individual- psychological, monologically-based theory, although it is a great deal more effectively camouflaged than is Searle’s theory on speech acts and – in contrast to Grice’s conversational maxims – contains calculations of implications as inherent *theoretical premises* and not as *orders* of rationality.

On dialogism, epistemic responsibility and objective hermeneutics

The notion that language is a kind of transportation system (“the conduit paradigm”) can, scientifically speaking, be expanded upon in accordance with general information-technology inspired cognitive theory, and has simultaneously embedded an implicit, but unambiguous ethical implication: Since the listener has the status of “the creature who is communicated to”, the speaker alone must assume responsibility for what is meant by what is said. This principle is so deeply rooted in our western individualistic mentality that it in practice seems to be accepted as a norm in both conventional and scholarly discourse. The question is whether it in fact also functions as a tied mandate in western scientific reflection on linguistic mediation of meaning. And whether consistently thought-out dialogism has so little impact in academic discourse- and conversation analysis because it is an “ism” that seems to break radically with such a normatively motivated, limited mandate.

There is certainly no doubt that we in conventional as well as scholarly discourse hold the speaker (the author) responsible for what he or she says (writes). Accordingly, I would assert that the unspoken but generally accepted assumptions in our attitudes towards others’ “speech acts” are similar to what Vilhelm Aubert (1958) so clearly demonstrates in legal discourse on criminal actions: The criminal has “free will” and must be held accountable for what he or she has

done, and based on this same implied premise a speaker must be held accountable for what he or she has *said*.

The above assertion concerns the adult, legally capable person. It does not include the young child and certainly not the infant prelinguistic communication, “protoconversation”, with the adult caregiver. The “response-ability” that the new-born is equipped with is totally cognitively impenetrable, in other words “chemically free” of infiltration of linguistic-culturally mediated cognitive categorizations and completely inaccessible to reflective voluntary control. Rather, it becomes a “responsibility” as the individual is accepted as an equal partner in conversation with adult representatives of the linguistic-cultural collective that he or she has been socialized into (Rommetveit, 1998).

I find it difficult to imagine that any preacher of dialogism would protest against this “right-hand rule” about responsibility for one’s own utterances as a practical guideline and ethically well-grounded “conversation maxim”. But if we apply this principle as a mandatory mandate in *semantic analysis* of utterances, where would that leave us?

In such monologically-bound mentality the speaker has in principle the status as *owner of – not “shareholder in”* – the words he or she utters, and the conversation analyst’s task is to assess the “literal meaning” in a (normatively) idealized and semantically closed “system language”. Most people would admit that this basis for analysing linguistic mediation of meaning becomes absurd when the utterance may be correctly characterized as a product of “a ventriloquist” (Wertsch, 1991), that is when the speaker is an authority-bound “parrot” who understands little or nothing of the assertion he or she puts forth without making apparent (and perhaps being completely unaware of the fact) that the utterance is merely a quotation of someone else. So, even if the car mechanic “takes me seriously” when I use words like “nozzle”, “carburettor” and the like while ranting about my car’s faulty engine, we both know that I cannot be held accountable for the meaning of these words. In this situation it is worthwhile to have Schleiermacher’s appeal to listeners (and conversation scientists) in mind: *It is crucial to understand our conversation partners better than they understand themselves.*

It is far more difficult to convince monologically indoctrinated discourse- and conversation theoreticians of the listener’s co-authorship and epistemic co-responsibility (Rommetveit, 1991) in everyday dialogue between equal conversation partners. In order to acquire an understanding of this topic, I have repeatedly invited intellectual opponents to reflect upon how it might be that

a certain Mrs. Smith can relate to someone hearing her say – and she does so with a clear conscience – that when Mr. Smith cuts the grass he *is working*, and then someone else hearing her say five minutes later that when he is still cutting grass he *isn't working*. During a telephone conversation with her friend Betty, who asks about Mrs. Smith's lazy husband (who is in fact still lying in bed), Mrs. Smith replies that he is out working. However, she tells Mr. Jones, who five minutes later calls to ask if Mr. Smith can go along on a fishing trip that Mr. Smith is not working. When she in both cases speaks truthfully and is understood, it is because she spontaneously accepts her conversation partner as being co-responsible for the interpretive premises in the different contexts – and meaning – regarding the utterance fragment “work”. When she speaks of her husband as working, she verbalizes the aspect of his activity on which her friend has focused through asking Mrs. Smith questions about the husband's laziness. However, when Mrs. Smith tells Mr. Jones that her husband is not working, the *leisure activity aspect* is in focus of their dialogically collaborative project.

Concerning these two truths about Mr. Smith's activity mediated by his wife, William James would most likely assert that they are the products of Mrs. Smith's “trade” on Betty's and Mr. Jones' truths. Let us now imagine an alternative sequence of events in which this does not prove to be the case – that when the telephone rings for the second time, Mrs. Smith, still believing that her husband is engaging in physical activity out in the yard, therefore tells Mr. Jones the following:

“Mr. Smith is working.”

By so doing, I would assert that she has provoked us to reflect upon a fundamental flaw in individual psychological, monologically-based communication and conversation theory. Based on the “right-hand rule” concerning the speaker's (own) responsibility for the meaning content in her utterances, she can certainly not be blamed for communication failure or lying in this particular case. On the contrary: In so far as both she and Mr. Jones regard mowing the grass as work, she may be said to have transported true “propositional information” to her conversation partner. This – intuitively absurd – conclusion may, in my opinion, not be avoided if we place a consistent monological, individual-psychological perspective at the heart of our theory on linguistically mediation of meaning.

The basic distinction between a consistently monological perspective and a radically dialogical alternative (Wold, 1992) concerns *epistemic responsibility for and authorship* of the meaning in utterances. Assigning the addressee epistemic (co-)responsibility means taking him or her “seriously”. In monologically-based

theory, it is in principle only the speaker, and not the addressee, who is assigned epistemic responsibility. In other words, the person for whom the utterance is “meant” has no other insight into the utterance’s meaning than what is “literally being said” *and* knowledge of the interpretive-relevant context. Deciphering “what is meant with what is said” must therefore in principle be charted as an increasingly longer and/or more complicated series of deductions should “utterance meaning” remove itself from “literal sentence meaning” (cf. Searle’s analysis of indirect linguistic acts in Searle, 1974; 1979). And I would claim that even the most rational and stringently designed models of language communication of meaning *qua* such deductive processes, are monological. Because the postulate regarding sophisticated series of deductions rests on far more fundamental postulates, namely that “a word is a *one-sided act*”, and that language is a piece of property that is at the disposition of the speaker alone (and not the listener), being in fact a negation of basic premises in dialogically-based mentality (cf. see the above excerpt from Vološinov and Gadamer).

To the extent the expression “literal meaning” is used within formal logical semantic tradition, it contains *an explicitly normative content*: In order to calculate the truth-value of complex “utterances”, one must use “propositional calculi” *without any kind of requirement of empirical verification*, taking for granted that every single tiny semantic component has one and the same truth-value across all imaginable variations in context. The formal logical semantics, represented by Gottlieb Frege, Bertrand Russel and the early Ludwig Wittgenstein, may, as do John Barwise and John Perry (1983), be called a semantics of “eternal sentences”. The goal of Barwise and Perry’s “situational semantics” is to perform a logical analysis of utterances inherent in communication situations, and their efforts may for this reason be said to represent a formal logical contribution to dialogically-based communication theory. Regarding the kinds of relationships between conversation partners that characterize Mrs. Smith’s telephone conversations, they use the expression “attunement to the attunement of the other”.

With this expression, critics may claim, Barwise and Perry are paying tribute to dialogism in a shroud of poetry and mystery. Let us therefore return to Mr. Smith’s – in a double sense – down-to-earth activity and to the telephone conversations about his mowing the lawn. Mrs. Smith’s exchange of words with her friend and thereafter Mr. Jones may in fact serve as an introduction to and actualization of a very significant implication of dialogically-based communication theory for empirical conversation analysis.

The *dialogically* indoctrinated analyst is duty-bound to investigate every single contribution (utterance, turn-taking or reply) from a double perspective: As potentially *context bound*, connected to something said before (or taken for granted) and as potentially *context creating*, directing towards the next contribution. *Prospectively* speaking, Betty's question about Mr. Smith's laziness (her thematic "initiative") makes her a co-author of the meaning in Mrs. Smith's reply. We may therefore in no way decipher this meaning content without analysing it *retrospectively* as a response to Betty's question. And the same strategy should be used to make us any hope of scientifically disciplined insight into what is taking place in the telephone conversation between Mrs. Smith and Mr. Jones.

This dialogically-based double perspective lies inherently as a theoretical foundation in Per Linell and Lennart Gustavsson's program and guidelines for imitative-response-coding of utterances implicit in conversation (Linell & Gustavsson, 1987; Linell, Gustavsson & Juvonen, 1988; Linell, 1990). It is elaborated and extensively commented upon by two of my partners in the Bad Homburg group, Per Linell and Ivana Marková (1993), in the article "Acts of Discourse: From Monological Speech Acts to Dialogical Interactions". Here the authors invite to a discussion of significant theoretical and methodological implications of a dialogic-based view for interdisciplinary discourse- and conversation research. And as participants in this discussion we should in my opinion also turn the spotlight on the elements of dialogism in our own academic work; we should reflect upon our empirical communication studies from a meta-dialogical perspective or *upon ourselves as our informants' dialogue partners*. What kind of questions are we seeking to answer in our research projects? How and how much are transcription and interpretation of our empirical "raw material" coloured by the questions we seek to answer?

As discourse- and conversation researchers we are *participatory* observers in the sense that we acknowledge our own linguistic-cultural competence as a necessary and legitimate resource in the development of scientifically documented knowledge. In a variant of dialogically-based analysis developed by the German conversation researcher Ulrich Övermann and co-workers, labelling it "objective hermeneutics" (Övermann, Tilman, Konau & Krambeck, 1979), participatory observation is made part of an overall strategy for *prospective interpretation of conversations* "from within". In order to guard against irrelevant hindsight in interpreting complicated, potentially strategically important and comprehensive utterances, analysts focus on the transcribed individual contributions to the conversation, one by one, with full knowledge of everything that

has been said previous to the utterance they analyse, but from the (in practice: often simulated) assumption that *they know nothing about what is later said*. In this manner they may be said to simulate a *participatory position*. However, in the analysis of each individual utterance, they are most certainly not involved participants, but rather distanced and semantically schooled *observers*. The goal of the analysis is in fact to identify *potential initiatives to co-authorship in the other conversation partner's next utterance, an utterance they pretend they have not yet heard*. The interpretation therefore in principle flows into *theoretically-based hypotheses regarding possible and plausible "next replies"*.

Övermann and colleagues' presentation of their version of conversation analysis is far less systematic than is my attempt to make a relatively concise presentation of their "objective hermeneutics". I assume that most conversation researchers will likely have difficulties accepting their expression – "objective hermeneutics", even as a label of my more explicitly formulated version of Övermann's strategy for prospective conversation analysis. In my view, the most important aspect of this strategy is the following: By committing themselves to putting forth hypotheses regarding utterances they (in principle) *have not yet heard*, the analysts establish a kind of quasi-experimental framework for future-oriented interpretation of linguistically mediated meaning. Thus, upon completing an exhaustive analysis of the entire conversation, the previously written hypotheses regarding "possible next replies" can serve as a quasi-empirical foundation for systematic reflection upon *non-realized "possible next replies"*, over "lost opportunities".

The expression "lost opportunities" has been taken from Georg Henrik von Wright's (1974) discussion of *time*, (physical) *causality* and (human) *intentionality* in *Causality and Determinism*. His analysis of retrospective versus future-oriented time perspective in a given chain of events is based on the fact of our *past* being ontically closed, but epistemically open, and our *future* both ontically and epistemically open. In other words, what is done or said can never be erased and re-done or said in a different way, but *we can in principle always change our interpretation of it*. However, before we do or say something we are in principle at liberty to choose between alternative actions and utterances. In a retrospective scientific account of a chain of events, it is for this reason natural – also within psychology, social sciences and the humanities– to attempt to explain the last event as product of a cause-effect chain. *But conversations are carried out forwards, and our subjective, experienced future is absurd without postulated freedom of choice and intentionality*.

What do these reflections upon time, intentionality and causality have to do with empirical conversation analysis and (my version of) Övermann's "objective hermeneutics"? In nearly every variation of modern conversation analysis, the retrospective time perspective seems to dominate interpretation, theory and conclusions. However, it is usually implicit, not explicitly formulated in premises or program and without discussing alternative strategies. On the contrary, in Övermann's "objective hermeneutics" prospective interpretation is integrated as a theoretically motivated and significant methodical element of the analysis. He himself utilizes conversation analysis when supervising therapists, with an important goal to help the therapist better understand and consider the client's initiative. After each contribution from his client, he wishes to *reflect upon* and *write down* alternative "next replies" from the therapist, who can then bring the conversation forward. When he after a completed analysis sits down with the therapist to discuss the conversation, his written *plausible but non-realized "next replies"* provoke the therapist to systematic reflection upon *what he did not say, but perhaps should have said in order to meet the client*.

In this kind of conversation *about* a prospectively analysed dialogue, the researcher's primary task is to help their conversation partners to *reflect "forward" upon their own contribution to the concluded, ontically closed yet epistemically open dialogue*, not merely explaining "why it went the way it did". The overall goal of the conversation about the conversation is *increased self-insight*. And in what other way can increased self-awareness be "objectively" manifested than in *future actions based on increased thorough reflections*? Therefore, what Övermann's point was when calling his form of hermeneutics "objective" seems to be "emancipating utility value" (Habermas, 1963): that the new self-insight the therapist acquires through "future-oriented reflection", will make him or her better qualified in dialogue with clients on their terms, to take more account of their initiative to co-authorship of meaning in the conversation, *to give them increased epistemic co-responsibility*.

On dialogism and ethics

Jerome Bruner states in *Acts of Meaning* (1990: 51):

To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance even if it is a moral stance against stances.

My story – or preaching – about dialogism is no exception in this regard, and neither are the writings of Martin Buber and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The two Continental European “Old Testament prophets” are committed moral philosophers. In their reflections upon *the ideal dialogue*, they are both strongly concerned with the aspect of linguistically mediated meaning related to epistemic co-responsibility and co-authorship. Buber calls the attitude one has to one’s conversation partner in the ideal dialogue an “I-You” attitude, and the significant distinction between an “I-You” conversation and an “I-It” communication appears to be this: During an “I-You” conversation, you meet your conversation partner as a fellow human being, a subject, *a potential co-author of your own biography*. By contrast, during “I-It” communication you turn your conversation partner into an object, “a creature communicated to”, thereby *acquiring the status of the sole author of his or her biography*.

In parts of Buber’s *Ich und Du* and Gadamer’s *Warheit und Methode*, it may be difficult to distinguish between philosophical-scientifically disciplined reflection and moral preaching. And if it is the case of dialogically-based discourse and conversation theory, generally speaking, that it is “morally tainted”, should not the conclusion be that dialogism is an *ideological* rather than a *scientific* “ism”? In answer to this question, the philosopher Hilary Putnam would reply in the negative, claiming that as much as representatives of humanistic research *acknowledge and reflexively focus on* their own moral involvement, they are honest and reflective representatives of “a moral science” (Putnam, 1978). More precisely, we can never escape our fate as *participatory* observers of how our fellow human beings’ act and speak, not even when we as researchers observe and interpret them as “research objects” or “informants”.

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