With Respect to Bakhtin: Some trends in contemporary dialogical theories

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Introduction

In spite of the context where it appears, this chapter is not primarily about Mikhail Bakhtin’s work. Rather it deals with present-day dialogical theories of language, communication and thinking, but also with the persistent importance of Bakhtinian ideas for these theories.

Mikhail Bakhtin was a literary scholar who mainly analysed written, and mostly literary, texts. But he also had fruitful and partly quite innovative ideas about language, interaction, thinking and communication in general. Todorov (1984: ix), in his introduction to some of Bakhtin’s ideas, said:

"Primarily a theoretician of texts (in the broad sense of the term, extending beyond "literature"), he saw himself forced by the need to shore up his theories to make extensive forays into psychology and sociology; he returned from them with a unitary view of the entire area of the human sciences, based on the identity of their materials: texts, and of their method: interpretation, or as he would rather put it, responsive understanding." (italics original)

The kinds of psychology and sociology that Todorov hints at in this quotation were hardly the mainstreams of American psychology and sociology. Rather, Bakhtin’s work has been instrumental in promoting something quite different, a dialogical alternative.

Dialogical theories: Interaction, contexts, other-orientation

As Ragnar Rommetveit has pointed out, dialogism has brought meanings and social minds back into the human sciences. Dialogical theories deal primarily with the human mind, and the mind is seen as a sense-making system (in the widest sense of this term). In bringing meaning back into psychology and language sciences, it stresses the role of the other, as well as interactions and contexts (Linell, 2009). It challenges the image of the solitary individual, so much cherished in Western philosophy (e.g. Descartes) and sometimes more widely in society (modern individualism). This is the icon portrayed in Auguste Rodin’s Le Penseur.

Interactionism: In the analysis of sense-making as it occurs in communication and interventions into the world, as well as in solo thinking or the reading of texts, etc., we must start out from the encounters, interactions, events etc. as the basic phenomena; they are primary, not secondary or derived. This idea makes dialogism different from mainstream psychology, which is based on the assumption – self-evident for its adherents – that individuals are there first, then they sometimes interact with other individuals. Interaction for them is, in Marková’s (2003) terms, “external”, that is, of a secondary nature. Dialogists, by contrast, assume that individuals have become what they are in and through interaction.
Contextualism: All sense-making practices are situated and contexted; contexts are always relevant, not just under certain circumstances. Moreover, contexts are dynamic; they become relevant and emerge in and through interaction. This is not to deny that many contextual resources are, and of course have to be, situation-transcending; they have been gradually appropriated over time, and are made relevant in new situations, by being recontextualised and accommodated in new communicative projects.

In other words, interactions and contexts are absolutely basic phenomena for sense-making in cognition and communication, not just peripheral or secondary. And this is possible because we are “thrown” into and live in a world populated by others.

Dialogism has gained quite extensive attention in recent decades, undoubtedly very much due to the reception of Bakhtin’s work. Yet, dialogical theories are more than the dialogism of Bakhtin’s circle. In Linell (2009), I advocate an ecumenical approach to
dialogism, arguing that it comprises much more than a philosophy of the human sciences. Lots of empirical research, particularly in the last thirty years, have confirmed its fruitfulness: Conversation Analysis and ethnomethodology, discursive psychology, context-based discourse analysis, ethnography of speaking and interactional sociolinguistics, gesture studies, interactional linguistics, gesture studies, cognitive dynamics, socio-cultural semiotics and cultural psychology, interdisciplinary dialogue analysis, to mention a few. For some purposes, it may not be very obvious why all this should be called “dialogism” (and be opposed to “monologism”). One could therefore propose that the term “dialogical theories” is to be understood as a kind of shorthand for “interactional and contextual theories of human sense-making”. At the same time, though, these theories all assume that sense-making is not a monologue, an activity involving autonomous individuals.

Having said this, as a kind of very brief introduction, I would now allot space to a discussion of some examples of how dialogical theories have taken us beyond Bakhtin in some respects. These involve respecifying language from linguistic systems and linguistic products to activities of situated languaging, and expanding the notions of cognition and communication from being “just” linguistic practices to being multi-modal activities in the world of embodied people (self and others), objects and artefacts.

From texts to situated interactions

The 1970s came with a so-called linguistic or discursive turn in the social sciences. One outcome of this was, in some circles (postmodern Discourse Theory), a tendency to isolate a linguistic or discursive world, in which sense-making is supposed to take place. After that, we may now witness a dialogical turn in the human sciences and perhaps to some extent in society at large; languaging and dialogue are then treated as interdependent with the body and the world (e.g. A. Clark, 1997).

Empirical research into language and interaction, first and foremost spoken language, has been greatly inspired, directly or indirectly, by Bakhtin. In this domain, the single most important work by Bakhtin is undoubtedly that of The Problem of Speech Genres (cf. Bakhtin, 1986; henceforward SpG). Here, Bakhtin argued for the importance not only of “speech genres” but also, among other things, for a clear distinction between “sentence” and “utterance”. Let me begin by a concise summary of his theory of the differences between sentences and utterances.

Sentences are, for Bakhtin, “units of language”, and utterances are “units of communication”, that is, basically turns as well as larger discourse units. SpG discusses a number of points at which utterances and sentences are different from one another:

1. Utterances, but not sentences, are demarcated on either side by a change of speaking subjects (cf. SpG: 76: “finalization of the utterance; ”inner side of the change of speech subjects”, as if the speaker ends by saying dixi). There are three aspects of finalization: a) the semantic exhaustiveness of the theme, b) the speaker’s plan or speech will, c) the typical compositional or generic forms of finalisation (SpG: 77–78).

1 I would never pretend, of course, that there is any agreement on exactly what various dialogical theories have or should have in common. In fact, I would argue that there are many divergences and controversies around (Linell, 2009). But that is only natural; cultures are full of competing "social representations" (Marková, 2003) characterised by mutual tensions and partial contradictions, heteroglossia and cognitive dissonances ("cognitive polyphasia" in the terms of Jovchelovitch, 2007).

2 This text was originally published in Russian in Bakhtin (1979), and then appeared in English as a chapter in Speech Genres and Other Late Essays (Bakhtin, 1986), pp. 60–102. Here I refer to this English translation.
Furthermore, unlike utterances, sentences:

2. “lack any direct contact with reality”; they have no specific reference to any extraverbal situation,
3. have no semantic fullness of value, and are “devoid of expressive intonation” \((SpG: 85)\),
4. like words (in the linguistic sense), do not belong to anybody; they have no authors \((SpG: 84)\) or addressees \((SpG: 95)\) (whereas addressivity is a constitutive feature of utterances \((SpG: 99)\),
5. since they have no relations to others’ utterances, they cannot evoke responses,
6. can be repeated (whereas situated utterances are unique and cannot be repeated; \(SpG: 134)\).

Clearly, sentences and utterances are quite different creatures, and Bakhtin provides us with a useful sketch. Sentences (system sentences, sentence types) are abstract units of language, “conventional” units in Bakhtin’s terms, whereas utterances are “real” units \((SpG: 71)\). But it seems that Bakhtin is not sufficiently dialogical in his theories of sentences and utterances. Here are four such points:

(a) Bakhtin puts too much emphasis on the speaker, as distinct from the listener or the participant in general: a) turns (utterances) are seen as necessarily finalised by the speaker, b) defined by (clear?) speaker intentions (the speaker’s “plan” or “will”): as a matter of fact, participants co-construct concrete utterances much more than Bakhtin seems to think

(b) (ad #5 above: sentences have no relations to units used by others): while sentences (sentence types) are abstract forms or methods, many of them are designed to be used in specific (types of) positions of sequences (of utterances)

(c) Bakhtin seems to be influenced by the idea of ”complete thought” \((SpG: 73)\), or \(Gesamtvorstellung\) (the proposition-like idea behind a whole sentence, advocated by Wilhelm Wundt, and many others\(^3\))

(d) Bakhtins gives us no theory of where sentences come from; but for us, if they are patterns or methods of utterance construction, they must have something to do with language use.

In addition, one may suspect that Bakhtin entertains the somewhat naïve, and conventional, theory that utterances are simply sentences in actual use. Yet, sentences, as alleged “units of language”, are to some extent academic, or language-standardising, constructions (see, e.g., Linell, 2005).

I cannot deal with these points at any length here. Some attention will be paid to (a) and (b).\(^4\) Let us then first recall that, according to Bakhtin and dialogical theories in general, utterances display responsivity and addressivity: they have \(both\) responsive, retroactive, backward-pointing relations to adjacent prior utterances, \(and\) anticipatory, projective, proactive, forward-pointing relations to possible next utterances or conversational contributions. This basic point will here be illustrated by an example from an American-English telephone conversation, borrowed from Emanuel Schegloff:

(1)  **STOLEN** (Schegloff, 2007, p. 232: MDE-MTRAC 60-1/2) Tony and Marsha are the parents of Joey, but they do not live together. Here Tony has called up Marsha to find out when

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\(^3\) See Blumenthal (1970:17, et passim). Wundt is not mentioned by Bakhtin, but cf. \(SpG:81, 86n\); cf. also the critique of Karcevskij’s”phrase” \((SpG: 82)\).

\(^4\) Point (d) will be implicitly brought up in a later section.
Joey, who has just visited Marsha, can be expected to arrive at Tony’s place. It turns out that his travelling plans have been changed, since his car has been partly demolished.5

1. Marsha: did Joey get home yet?
2. Tony: well I w’s wondering when ‘e left.
3. (0.2)
4. Marsha: .hhh uh:(d) did OH: .h y’re not in on what
5. happen’. (hh) (d)
6. Tony: no(h)=
7. Marsha: =he’s flying
8. (0.2)
9. Marsha: an Ilene is going to meet ’im: becuz
10. the to:p w’s ripped off’v his car which is
11. to say somebody helped themselves.
12. Tony: stolen.
13. (0.4)

Any situated utterance has responsive and projective, i.e. backward- and forward-pointing properties to prior and possible next utterances, although the proportions of responsiveness and projection may vary. For example, an interrogative (line 1) projects an answer. Here Tony is not able to deliver a clear answer; instead, he prefaces his reply with “well”, which expresses exactly that, and then he issues what is in effect a counter-question (“I was wondering”), another soliciting (i.e. strongly projecting) utterance. Again, we do not get a proper answer; instead, Marsha responds (lines 4–5), not to the implicit question itself, but to the fact that she got a counter-question rather than an answer to her initial question (in line 1). Tony’s rather minimal response in line 6 is of course only interpretable in relation to the prior question; response particles are amongst those linguistic resources that are most parasitic on the preceding context. And so on. The situated meaning of each utterance is dependent on its sequential position. For example, consider line 12: a single word like “stolen” is, as an utterance, of course completely dependent for its interpretation on the context (what is stolen, and what precisely does “stolen” mean here?). It is in the prior context that we get to know what has been stolen. At the same time what Tony does in line 12 is, as Schegloff (1996) has pointed out, to confirm an allusion in Marsha’s prior message (“somebody helped themselves”). Confirmation in interaction is of course always a responsive action.

But, as I alluded to a while ago, grammarians do not deal with situated utterances, and their responsive and projective relations to adjacent utterances. They tend to deal with abstract, system sentences (sentence types). Let us therefore shift our focus from interaction (utterances) per se to the semiotic resources provided by language, or rather the resources assembled through language users’ cumulative, and arguably structured, experiences of linguistic practices that can be applied in new situations of use.

Dialogical theories will look upon grammatical constructions as being designed to be used in interaction. Such constructions are not responsive and projective utterances in themselves, but many of them have kinds of responsive and projective potentials at the system level. For example, the so-called it-cleft is a responsive construction. Its situated occurrence normally presupposes a prior utterance in which the content of the relative clause was first introduced. Here is a Swedish example:

(2) (A. Lindström) (MOL1:A:4: BVC: 647ff; excerpt from a telephone conversation between Gerda and Viveka: they talk about an apologetic letter that Gerda’s family received from a

5 Transcription conventions are the conventional Conversation Analysis ones. However, the transcription has been simplified here, and the orthography normalised. Square brackets, [], mark the beginning of overlapping talk. The equals sign, =, indicates that there is absolutely no pause between utterances.
primary health care centre, to which Gerda has directed a complaint. Annika, who is a nurse, and Krister, who is a doctor, work at this centre.6

1. G: (...) ja träffa ju Annika förresten å hon hälsade så
    (…) incidentally I met Annika an’ she greeted me
2. glatt på mej, du hörde de att dom hade skrivit brev
   quite cheerfully, you heard that they had written a letter
3. till oss [va] to us, didn’t [you]
    [no: I didn’t]
5. G: hja: jo de gjorde dom sörrö, [.h]
    I see, well, They did, you see [.h]
6. V: [å ba om y:rsäkt ell[er]?]
    [an’apologised] [or?]
7. G: [ja:]
    [yes]
8. (0.2)
9. V: men de va ju bra[li]
    but that was good, wasn’t it[li]
10. G: de va ju jättebra,
    that was mighty good.
11. V: va de eh Krister som hade skriv[i (de)?]
    was it eh Chris who had wri[tten (it)?]
    [Chris had written it.
13. V: .hha förstog de(h), hehe.h
    .yeah understood that, hehe.h
14. G: ja Annika tyckte ju fortifarande inte att de va nät
    yes Annika still didn’t think there was anything
15. som va märklit. så de: förstår ja men men:
    odd about it. so I understand that but but
16. de va Krister som hade skrivi re,
    it was Chris who had written it.
17. V: ja just de.
    yes exactly.

The general point is that the it-cleft construction can occur when a specific contextual configuration has been built up in the prior discourse. This configuration involves what is to be taken as known and shared information at that point in time when the it-cleft can be applied. The construction is therefore responsive to co(n)text, rather than being part of a freely occurring initiative.7 In the conversational episode between Gerda (G) and Viveka (V) the cleft construction occurs twice. The first instance (line 11: va de Krister som hade skriv[i (de)] occurs as a response to a situation in which there are two persons, two alternative referents, who could have been involved in the writing of the apologetic letter. Thus, a local communicative project is occasioned in the interaction in which the goal is to make it mutually known who did it. Viveka chooses one candidate person (“Krister”) in her question of line 11. (The other alternative is evidently “Annika”, who is mentioned in line 1.) Since Gerda seems to feel that her specification in line 12 calls for, or projects, an explanation or an account, perhaps because Viveka has received her information with laughter (line 13), such an account is

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6 A rough English translation is given in italics between the lines. Underlining of the vowel in a stressed syllable denotes a focally stressed word. (On transcription, see also note 5.) Bold is used for marking the constructions in focus, and not any property of style of pronunciation. I wish to thank Anna Lindström for letting me use this example from her corpus of Swedish telephone conversations.

7 Of course, an it-cleft can occasionally occur without this kind of prior context, but then the speaker relies on the addressee’s ability to supply such a context.
given in lines 14–15, before Gerda once again states the identity of the author, now using the cleft another time (line 16).

Languages contain lots of responsive grammatical constructions. Just one more example will suffice here: the “stressed finite” used in (what Tanya Stivers, 2005, terms) modified repeats, as in (3a–b):

(3a) “partial modified repeat” (A and B are busy with cooking)
A:  this’s smelling good.
    (...)
B:  it’s just all the spices.
A:  it is.

(3b) “full modified repeat” (two teachers discuss who should do a particular task)
A:  that was Alison’s job.
B:  oh that’s right. it is Alison’s job.

The construction in (3a) is a “partial modified repeat” because it is elliptic in not repeating the predicate nominal (”just all the spices”), whereas the “full” repeat (3b) is a full clause with both subject and predicate. The defining formal feature of the construction exemplified here is the stress on the finite verb, which is often an auxiliary, and the function of the construction is to confirm the truth of the proposition expressed in the prior utterance. Repeats are not simply repetitions, that is, copies of earlier utterances (Bakhtin’s point #6).

“Elliptic sentences”, such as the construction in (3a), are legion in interactive language, especially in conversation. Instead of deriving an elliptic sentence from a full underlying sentence, as in a “monologist” theoretical grammar, an interactional, dialogical theory would show how it is dependent on its actual co-text, and what interactional job it can do there.

Responsive constructions are much more common than has been thought in traditional grammar theory. The same applies to projective constructions, a large class comprising, among other constructions, interrogatives, such as yes/no-questions and wh-questions, which, as we know, project different kinds of answers.

In addition to the responsive-projective network of links, there are many other properties that can make utterances less sentence-like than is conventionally thought. Many utterances are deviant from written-language sentences. For example, so-called apokoinou, or “pivot”, utterances, are a case in point. Here are some examples from German (Scheutz, 2005):

(4a) des is was furchtbare is des.
    That is something terrible is that

(4b) wie=s wegkommen sind war er (.). zehn zwölf jahr sowas
    werd=er gewesen sein
    When they left was he ten twelve years or so will he have been
    (i.e. he must have been)

Example (4a) is a mirror-image variant of a pivot construction, in which the onset (pre-pivot) is similar to the end (post-pivot) (except, of course, for word order). The end seems just to repeat the beginning, in a completely redundant way. However, in actual situated interaction, such a construction would have a function, for example, one of confirming what has been predicated in the pivot (the central element: that something was terrible), or of stressing the importance of this. In (4b) there is more of a perspective shift; the speaker first asserts that “he was (something not specified)” without any hedge, then – after the pivot which mentions an approximate period of time – changes this into a statement with a lower degree of epistemic certainty (“he must have been”).
German pivot constructions often break the mold of the famous Rahmenkonstruktion, thus resulting in “ungrammatical” structures, if judged from written-language standards (Scheutz, 2005):

(4c)  
er hat in Salzburg hat=er ja einmal (. ) i glaub zwei semester  
lang hat=er eine gastprofessur ghabt.

He has in Salzburg has he once I think two semesters has he had a guest professorship.

The insertion of hat er, which is mirroring the pre-pivot er hat, breaks up the frame construction. The utterance is reconstructed, and retroconstructed, during the course of production. There is both a perspective shift in the conceptualisation of content, and a syntactic ”structure shift”. Such pivot phenomena are quite frequent in many languages, such as German and Swedish (just to mention two languages that have been thoroughly researched on this point).8

“On-line syntax” (Auer, 2000, 2007) in real situated, conversational language involves structure shifts, incomplete integrations, retroconstructions etc. as the emergent results of various dynamic interactive (intra- or interpersonal) processes. It is not that spoken language lacks linguistic structure, but this structure deviates from received written-language-biased grammar (Linell, 2005). Accordingly, “dialogical” (interactional-contextual) grammar departs from the mainstream tradition in grammar which sees grammatical structures in terms of autonomous sentences. At the theoretical level, we move from viewing sentences as expressions of complete thoughts to seeing them as constructions designed to be used as links in chains of cognitive and communicative actions (in dialogue with self and others). Utterances are not necessarily ”possibly complete”, let alone expressing ”complete thoughts”. The responsive-projective relations of utterances to their adjacent utterances are based on their ”interactional construction” (Goodwin, 1979). This has repercussions on the nature of grammatical resources too.

We could conclude that Bakhtin’s own assumptions about (sometimes relatively conventional) units of language (as laid out in SpG) focused on static structure, rather than on processes in time. Similarly, we could argue that the notion of “speech genres”, which he defined as “relatively stable” “forms of combinations of forms” (SpG: 60, 81, et passim; Holquist, 1986: xvi) is a rather text-based notion. Today, we may argue that this has to be complemented by notions of “communicative activity types”, which are notions more connected to concepts like ”situation”, “encounter” and of course “activity” (Linell, 2009). This is not to deny that Bakhtin was a very important forerunner of modern dialogical language studies (as evidenced in SpG), and so was of course his close colleague Voloshinov (1979). And it would be completely anachronistic to require Bakhtin to present an observationally and adequate theory of situated interaction long before the advent of the necessary technology for recording and analysing talk. Similarly, there was hardly an empirically based dialogical theory of sense-making available in his time.

From language to multi-modal interactions in the world
At this point, I would like to shift topic rather drastically, and address the issue of communication involving persons with disabilities. For a start, I would like to point out that nowhere it seems easier to demonstrate the relevance of dialogical theory (other-orientation, interactions, contexts) than in communication with persons with disabilities. You can immediately see the interdependencies with others, or, for that matter, dependencies on the other.

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8 For German, see Scheutz (2005). For a thorough analysis of apokoinou in Swedish, see Norén (2007).
Consider this example with an aided speaker using a Bliss board with abstract symbols in his communication with a speaking interlocutor:

(5) GOING HOME WITH THE HOSPITAL VAN (Kraat, 1985: 81): A = aided speaker using the Bliss board, P = speaking partner, CAPITALS designate (pointings to) Bliss board symbols, italics are body movements):

1. A: HOME
2. P: home? what about home? something about your sister?
3. A: no. DAY OF THE WEEK
5. A: yes
6. P: something about home and Saturday. are you going home going home on Saturday?
7. A: MAN
8. P: a man? someone special is coming?
9. A: no
10. P: I should find out who this man is?
11. A: yes
13. A: yes
14. P: someone in the hospital. let me see, a doctor? a therapist? a friend? (.) can you give me another hint?
15. A: ((eye points to top of partner’s head))
16. P: head. part of the head. brains? he works with the head?
17. A: COLOR

Here, the aided speaker A has something to say, and the speaking partner P formulates it in spoken language, with A’s help. P uses a guessing strategy (lines 4, 14), which allows A to respond with head-shakes (“no”; lines 3, 9) or noddings (“yes”; lines 5, 11, 13). With the help of these resources and the Bliss board, which is an external cognitive artefact, P can successively come to understand what A wants to communicate. Excerpt (5) only shows the beginning of the interaction, which so far has enabled P to conclude that A’s message involves a “man working in the hospital” (lines 7–8, 12–13) and that they are concerned with something about “going home” on the upcoming “Saturday” (line 6). There follows a sequence of about 100 turns (not shown here), which are used by the two to jointly formulate A’s request “Can Carl, the security guard, possibly take me home on Saturday with the hospital van?” It takes time, but they succeed in the end. But in order to make sense, and develop mutual and shared understandings, the two participants are absolutely dependent on one another. They do not behave like Le Penseur. The general point is that many other kinds of communication, also between non-disabled participants, presuppose dialogical interdependencies too, although we may not be as accustomed to pay attention to them. Ultimately, virtually all sense-making depends on prior or present, actual or imagined contexts and interactions.

Karin Junefelt made pioneering dialogical studies, drawing on Vygotsky, Piaget and Bakhtin, of blind children in interaction with sighted parents (cf. Junefelt, 2007). But let me turn here to another category of persons with multiple disabilities, those who are born deafblind. Souriau Rodbroe & Janssen (2008), and their collaborators, have published a thoroughly dialogical account, with plenty of video illustrations, of the communicative development and behaviours of the congenitally deafblind. They demonstrate the importance of non-verbal and pre-linguistic, and even pre-semiotic and pre-conceptual, communication and cognition between these persons and their carers. Although these interactions must be seen on video, which I cannot use here, I will still reproduce a partial

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9 I am indebted to Inger Rodbroe, Marleen Janssen, Jacques Souriau, Anne Nafstad, Marlene Daelman and Flemming Ask Larsen for introducing me to this material and this world.
transcription of a sequence from Souriau et al. (op.cit.: III: 97). Of course, it cannot do justice to the details of the parties’ embodied interactions. (See also Fig. 2).

(6) INGRID AND THE CRAB: Ingrid, who is a young woman (24 years of age), with practically no sight or hearing. She and her assistant Gunnar have been on a fishing expedition. They have caught some small crabs, which are now kept in a bucket. The two are now sitting on the pier. Gunnar takes up a crab and puts it on his naked arm, and then on hers, letting the crab crawl up time after time. The real and the re-enacted actions occur in several rounds, each consisting of several moments. Here we see two such rounds in the sequence. All the time, he shares the experience with her.10

1. G: ja GUNNAR kendte, shows on his sleeve *Gunnar på armen* yes felt Gunnar on his arm
2. G pulls up his sleeve, imitates the crab running up the arm
3. G lets (the real) crab run up his arm, ja (.). ja (.). ja
4. G reenacts the event by iconic movements; I seems fairly focused, with her hand in a recipiency position
5. GUNNAR FEEL Gunnar kendte, å hå hâ↑ Gunnar felt
6. G: du "ska Gunnar ta" opp, en sån opp!om igen ONCE-AGAIN, hey [you] should Gunnar pick up such one up once again
7. G: leads I to help him to pick up a crab from the bucket
8. G: åv åv åv åh↑
9. GUNNAR TAKE-UP picks up a bigger crab

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10 Some transcription conventions:
Courier = words spoken in Norwegian
*Italics* = English translations between lines
CAPITALS = tactile signs (whether conventional or idiosyncratic)
Normal text = descriptions of bodily behaviours
10. G: ska vi kende, ja, ska vi kende  
    let us feel yes let us feel
11. G prepares I’s arm by pulling up her sleeve
12. G: å så så; G lets the crab run up I’s lower arm; I looks focused  
    an’ so so but fairly tense
    an’ ho ho ho ho! what? did you feel it? crrrab
14. G shows its (imitated) movement on I’s arm ja ha ha ha?  
15. G: om† igen, imitates crab’s movement, ja ja ja  
    once again yes yes yes
16. G lets the real crab run sjhhh
17. FEEL shows the movements on I’s arm hâh!!
18. va va de? va va de?  
    what was that? what was that?
19. FEEL (signed on I)  
20. ja!! de de de... den krabba! ja ha ha så... (with enthusiasm)  
    yes!! it it it that crab yes ha ha so
21. ska vi ta’n G throws the crab into the bucket  
    Shall we take it

This much simplified transcript shows two rounds of action-and-event sequences, lines 1–5 and 6–21. Each round comprises three components: preparing for action, performing action (sometimes several times), and retrospectively summing up the actions-with-experiences. For example, in the second round, the preparation involves two moments, proposing the new round (line 6) and preparing Ingrid’s arm for the event (lines 7–11), and the following performance comprises two runs by the real crab and one interstitial faked run (lines 12–17). Finally, the round ends up with Gunnar enthusiastically commenting upon and, as it were, celebrating the experience (lines 18–20), and then dropping the crab (line 21).

The transcript in (6) makes Ingrid almost invisible. But the video shows that she takes part in the interaction, although not with any salient initiatives. But she changes between a “feeling-and-thinking face” when she is feeling the movements of the crab or Gunnar’s simulated crab, and her facial behaviours seems to reflect some sort of recognition during the phases of retrospective actions (lines 13–14, 18–20). Gunnar’s contributions are accommodated to these responses.

This communicative episode involves several semiotic resources. Basically, we witness how parties share experiences and produce emotionally charged bodily reactions, using the concrete situation itself. Gunnar is also accompanying and supplementing the crab’s movements with tactile signs and talk. Ingrid cannot hear his spoken words but she can feel the vibrations of the emotional excitement in Gunnar’s body. At home, on the day after (not shown here), they re-enact their prior shared experiences, with Gunnar now iconically playing out the crab’s movements, and filling in with more tactile signs and bodily expressions of emotions (and speech). Ingrid shows that she understands and enjoys it. She is completely dependent on her partner and his bodily actions, signs, his other movements and his bodily expressions of emotions, but they make and experience meaning together. They can build upon their common communicative biography, in this case from the day before.

I do not think that dialogists can teach specialists on deafblindness very much. But I am convinced that they can teach us a lot: about the nature of communication, inter-dependencies, the importance of contexts and situations, the emergence of meaning, the development from shared situations (partly experienced together) – via pre-conceptual and pre-semiotic mechanisms to concepts associated with linguistic resources – to using these resources with their meaning potentials to create new situated meanings in new situations.
A deafblind person and her partner communicate with the means available to them, which include real-world enactments, feeling real-world objects, iconic tactile gestures, tactile signs, direct bodily contact, vibrations (and some speech, if the deafblind person has some hearing ability). They exploit a whole configuration of semiotic resources in their dynamic, embodied interaction. In fact, sighted and hearing people normally do so too, when we meet face-to-face (Goodwin, 2000). However, we often pay little attention to this fact, because we have been indoctrinated to believe that dialogue basically equals verbal language.

Therefore, the study of sense-making activities in communication involving persons with disabilities is a corrective to the wide-spread individualism in psychology and other sciences, and in modernity at large. It goes against the idea of the autonomous subject, illustrated here by the dependence of a “weak” participant on her scaffolding partner (her “other”). It also teaches us that language is not segregated from other modalities. Dialogue explains language, rather than the other way around.

Perhaps, there is in particular one other point about dialogue that these examples might elucidate. Actually, this point has two sides. One aspect concerns the very terms “dialogue” and “dialogical”. It is not uncommon that outsiders assume that dialogical theories are about open, symmetrical, benevolent communication, with equal opportunities to participate, or about the norm to develop or sustain such communicative conduct. But dialogical theories are designed to account for all kinds of communicative and cognitive activities. As a matter of fact, communication almost always involves asymmetries of knowledge and participation. Obviously, our two last examples (5, 6) are strongly asymmetrical. But despite the asymmetrical division of communicative labour – the parties contribute in quite different ways – their contributions are largely complementary. For example, one party asks a question, the other provides an answer, and the two perhaps negotiate the adequacy of that answer etc. in what may be called a common “communicative project” (Linell, 2009). And dialogism should be capable of explaining also kinds of meaning-making that takes place under extreme (and often intolerable) asymmetrical conditions, e.g. in totalitarian regimes (Bräten, 2000, with references to the Holocaust and other historical examples) or in behaviourist conditioning.

It is said (Nafstad, pers. comm.) that in some cultures the congenitally deafblind are usually treated with (what can be seen as) methods of classical or operant conditioning. Even that could be described, using the tools of dialogical theories. But there is indeed another, “soft” side of dialogism, which concerns applied ethics and has engaged several dialogical thinkers, notably Buber, Bakhtin and Lévinas. This implies treating the other, perhaps an infant, a demented person or somebody with severe disabilities, as a significant other with a mind, that is, with some sense-making ability. What Gunnar seems to be doing constantly in the interaction with Ingrid is to be looking for signs of communicative agency, and trying to detect initiatives that could be exploited in developing her abilities. Treating the other as if she has a mind that goes beyond what she can actually achieve, or at least achieve by herself, is what Vygotsky, another outstanding dialogist, labels as expanding the “zone of proximal development”. The other’s will to understand the weaker partner, a listening attitude combined with guidance, provides the other with (a sense of having) mind, self and human dignity (Nafstad, forthc.).

Interaction with minded bodies and cognitive artefacts.

Bakhtin opened up many avenues towards transcending texts and ordinary conversations in the exploration of human sense-making. The sense-making resources do not only re-
side in language and other abstract semiotic systems; there are also “material bearers of meaning” (Holquist, 1986: xii), for example, a person’s bodily gestures, as well as objects in the world, and in particular artefacts designed to provide meaning. In modern, technologically saturated environments, these artefacts abound. Cognitive artefacts are tools for thinking, richly structured with diversified affordances for use, including both practical, non-communicative use and processes of meaning-making (texts, computers, computer systems, medical technology etc.). The anaesthesia machine (Fig. 3) is an example:

![Figure 3. The anaesthesia machine (after Karsvall, 2010)](image)

The anaesthesia machine, which is used during surgical operations, can show the patient’s heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, levels of oxygen and CO₂ retention, and levels of anaesthetics (computer controlled infusion pumps support the patient’s respiration and levels of intravenous analgesia and inhalation gases). The machine is used for checking many different values, and is designed to provide alarm signals, but it is also used as a shelf for instruction lists, pagers, books, etc. (see Fig. 3).

This machine is vital, but it provides meaning only when read off and used by human sense-makers. The meaning potential, or affordances, of the machine are socially created and sustained; professionals have learnt how they can use and make sense of the machine in context.

Written, printed or computer-borne texts are also artefacts, but they belong to another sphere than anaesthesia machines. Text reading often focuses on the artefact itself, the text with its affordances of meaning, some of which are detached from situations (texts can be about anything). Therefore, written texts may promote a textual, literate bias and an "objective" conceptualisation of meaning; literacy supports objective conception of communicative content.

But Bakhtin advised us not to study texts merely as verbal texts with content, but as resources used by human beings in different contexts. The novel is an advanced written artefact replete with text-internal dialogicality (intertextuality, interaction within the text and with other texts). But there is also interaction between the text and its reader, driven by the reader’s efforts for understanding.

Only responsive understanding by humans provide texts with meaning. This points us away from texts as closed entities, but also from the individual as an information-processing mechanism. It points to the embodied mind interdependent with others and with contexts and interactions.
Some conclusions
We have a kind of literate bias in our culture. Verbal language, particularly written, literate language are central. And indeed, they deserve this position, as they have profoundly changed human existence. But we have also acquired a written-language-biased conception of language itself, including spoken language (Linell, 2005). This has made as partly blind to the multi-modalities in dialogue in interaction, and to the fact that language evolves in the context of pre-linguistic interaction and even pre-semiotic sense-making.

What we saw in (6) is just a more extreme case; "normal" children also learn in partly the same ways, but much more quickly and more easily, supported and scaffolded as they are by the surrounding linguistic culture.

Bakhtin was, first and foremost, a literary scholar. He was concerned with, for example, multi-voiced texts. Seen from today’s perspective, one may contend that he was also subject to a literary bias. Indeed, I ventured to suggest earlier that he was not always sufficiently dialogical.

But that is of course not the whole truth. Bakhtin dealt successfully with the predicaments of oral utterances (Speech Genres), he emphasised the role of prosodies (accentuation and reaccentuation), and role of the body (Cresswell & Teucher, 2008), etc. Beyond that, in a whole range of areas that he actually did not deal with, and could not possibly have dealt with (for example, video-analysis), he still functions as a source of inspiration.

Dialogism is, by its very nature, interdisciplinary. Although interdisciplinarity is often resisted, defied and combated by academic establishments, the problems and issues of life, mind and society, and the physical world, are not disciplinarily organised. Language is a good example. It is not just an abstract system; it comprises languaging (“language use, linguistic practices”), actions and activities, “speech genres” and communicative activity types, and many other resources for sense-making, including living bodies and objects in the environment (Goodwin, 2000). Therefore, language sciences comprise more than linguistics: pragmatic theories of languaging, parts of philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, biology, computer sciences, arts and literature. Bakhtin and later dialogists, many of them in their empirical studies, have shown us why.

References