The Bakhtin case
An apparent tension between two traditions in dialogue studies

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Studies about dialogue are conducted in a descriptive perspective, but also in a so-called normative approach or tradition. Taking Bakhtin’s case, I consider this tension and show how it can be treated as a question of disciplines and interdisciplinarity, which permits us to understand how they are both necessary and complement each other. This disciplinary angle can be relevant to understand Bakhtin’s own work but also other research paths. Showing then how this way of structuring research is lacking certain elements notably the evaluative aspect of any discourse and discourse study, I develop the hypothesis according to which a triad of terms might be more useful to reflect and study dialogue than just the descriptive/normative dyad, suggesting the introduction of Peircian categories.

Keywords: Bakhtin, dialogue, interdisciplinarity, Peirce, dialogical studies

1. Introduction

The question of anthropology can certainly gain by looking at dialogue. We can study actual exchanges of a dialogic nature, between individuals or inside literary works. Bakhtin has thought about dialogism in heteroglossia, e.g. as it is found in and among a plurality of languages: it permits to revisit and reposition the anthropological question. But on the other side, dialogue as a relational ideal is a challenge to the persons, to their understanding of situations and issues. We can surmise that dialogue as a sort of socially shared condition is somehow required by the normative and descriptive methodological stances that characterize most of the time the different perspectives on dialogue; all these elements are present in Bakhtin. We are looking here for a better understanding of the relationship between those descriptive and normative trends, because they clearly characterize human existence.
A number of enterprises can be distinguished. There might be descriptive essays referring to dialogism by focusing on specific discourses. There can also be many approaches calling for dialogue as an attitude and as a practice: this is frequently seen in mediation contexts, etc. Some essays might on one side make sense of events with partners, clarify processes of organizing together, and on the other side, essays can suggest ways for deliberating and deciding, or express the requirements of an ethical communication.

But there is another question: should we go further and simply admit dialogism as a general condition of human social life, and accept to redefine our relationship to others and the surrounding world accordingly? Answering yes to this question would mean admitting the relational character of existence in an environment, a position held by Dewey in many different texts (notably Dewey 1929 [1925]). This goes beyond descriptive or normative enterprises that would be limited to particular situations.

There is some degree of distinction, complementarity, and potentially opposition between these different enterprises. Once this first task of clarification is done, another one can be treated: there is a theoretical and practical interest in reinterpreting the notions of heteroglossia and polyglossia, notions most of the time limited to analytical and descriptive enterprises, with reference to specific, well developed literary works. These notions might also have an important social and ethical significance. Since heteroglossia and polyglossia point to a pluralism of voices in a given situation and aim to take these into account, they might also have more ethical and practical significance than what was previously acknowledged. The supposition here will be that what goes for dialogism goes too for these notions, once we acknowledge they have different, complementing meanings. In this way, the result might be an extension of the ethical and practical perspectives already recognized around dialogism, giving space to the recognition of a valid and important contribution of pluralist sources to elaborate meaning, making decisions, organizing in different contexts.

Many terms are used to encapsulate this dialogical element. One basic expression Bakthin uses is polyphony, as when he discusses the characteristics of Dostoevsky’s novel, especially the relationships between author and hero, to whom voice is given (Bakhtin 1973, 62). It is also used to identify the relation between a multiplicity of genres that are indicated in the list at the beginning of Discourse in the Novel. Furthermore, commentators have discussed intertextuality to describe some basic dialogicity, as Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov did (Todorov 1980); but for others, the main source of intertextuality theory is in Bakhtin (Allen 2000, 16). Intertextuality means that any text in literature or elsewhere is situated in a network of texts, being somehow echoing or answering the other texts (Holquist 1990).
The notion of heteroglossia is used for taking into account the plurality of discourses that characterize the novel, the narrator and the author, minor genres intervening in the text, the different characters involved, social discourses including what he calls ideologies: these discourses are somehow unified by the writer. Bakhtin’s notion stresses the tensions between these discourses, frequently responding to one another or identifiable only by contrast, as if they gave response one to the other. By extension, dialogicity can be seen in Bakhtin as characterizing sub-domains: language, texts … even thinking itself, since there is no reason to postulate some “private thinking”, an element deemed not to exist by Wittgenstein.

There is a way to recapture Bakhtin’s analysis of dialogism by looking at a section of *Crime and Punishment* from Dostoevsky. In fact, instances of dialogism in Bakhtin’s sense are numerous in that famous book; recalling a brief episode will remind us of one of its possible configurations. The narration tells us at some point that the central protagonist of the story, Raskolnikov, is in a café and he hears a conversation between two students. They are discussing the situation with this old woman who lends money to people and her sister, Lisbeth; they discuss the benefit it could represent for a whole series of persons if that old woman were to be killed and her valuables stolen. The narrator links then to the hero’s thoughts: how could this conversation be happening by chance, since just a short while ago, as he was getting out of the old woman’s house, he had the embryo of an idea, only to fall on these two having this strangest of conversations? The narrator goes on, expressing that this coincidence would always seem strange to Raskolnikov; it seems there was some predestination implied, there was “the finger of destiny” (*Crime and Punishment*, Part I, Chapter VI). The emerging thought process in the main protagonist of this novel responds to the exchange between the two students, giving form and precise content to his inchoative thoughts; knowing what is going on in the character’s mind, the narrator presents us this understanding as a manifestation of destiny. As if internal processes needed this external dialogue between strangers to establish the character’s decision and resolve, imbuing him with a sense of fate.

Bakhtin asserts that the same kind of reasoning can be applied to verbal interlocutions taking place in the social world. The utterer’s words need other utterer’s words to be able to be heard; discussing of given things, the words of others are already present to define/describe and characterize these elements somehow. Bakhtin’s theory of what can be called “dialogicity” has an intrinsic relation to these different relationships. Be it written or spoken, no discourse is understandable in and by itself, it necessarily refers and requires its communication partners, with the help of the meanings communicated in all their richness and complexity.

The tensions towards unity (that manifests itself in any utterance, and also affects the whole of language acts) at the same time as the tension for the singularity
expressing itself in specific genres, characters, style, are recognized and acknowledged as forces at work in any utterance. This means they are elements that push in contradictory directions, and that situates the speaker or writer in the heart of that tension, as in a given nexus of opposing forces. How this might affect specific utterers is susceptible to practical inquiries and maybe answers. Can we say that these forces have some normative dimension? Certainly, since the tension in the centripetal direction wants every element to conform to common norms, and the centrifugal tension is all with respecting the specificity of particular languages, dialects and expressions. The description then would have to recognize this normative push and pull deemed to be present in all kinds of language occurrences.

2. History of reception and difficulties

Bakhtin’s work excludes to focus on the pure individuality of a subject as a source of expression, as he also excludes to consider language as a whole, putting the focus instead on discourse as utterances in interaction. This way, he certainly overcomes both the formalist tendency (that will later be taken on anew by structuralism) while keeping his distance from a Humboldtian accent placed on language as creativity, that would be akin to the romantics’ hermeneutics of geniality (Gadamer 1960). Interestingly, if we exclude the singular and the holistic, interactions are what remains as a middle, constructive ground.

Bakhtin’s perspective was discovered by Western science in the 1960s. It was progressively rendered accessible by Vadim Kozhinov in Russia (after Khrushchev’s arrival at official power); he was also well known by Roman Jakobson (Voloshinov 1973, “Translator’s Preface”, vii). He was introduced in the French-speaking world by Julia Kristeva (with some help by Roland Barthes) and later Tzvetan Todorov, people doing their careers in France but who had the advantage of being well versed in Russian. Julia Kristeva is famous for her research in linguistics and literature (Kristeva, 1969 and other works, in recent decades focusing more on feminist issues). She was born in Bulgaria (1941) and arrived in France in 1966. Todorov, also born in Soviet Bulgaria (1939), did important work by translating the Russian formalists, was following in the tradition inaugurated by De Saussure. A more complete history of the reception of Bakhtin, that would include the English-speaking world, is yet awaited for.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) is linked with his close associates of the so-called “Bakhtin Circle”, Medvedev and Voloshinov (Bakhtin, in Todorov 1981; but see also Peytard 1995; Holquist 1990). This relationship has been discussed at length. The situation in that respect is not satisfyingly clarified as of yet, even though some positions on the issues have been expressed. One position asserts:
it is a school, some rewriting might have been done by Bakhtin of works by two other authors that did exist. Todorov quotes sources alleging that for the most part, these writings were from Bakhtin himself. There is also the argument that he used these names to avoid censorship, as pseudonyms. More recent authors hold that works previously attributed to Bakhtin were probably not his; respectively *Marxism* … and *The formal method* … would really be respectively from Voloshinov and Medvedev. One day, more stylistic analysis of the Russian original elements in style and redundancies might be exploited further to settle this. But the themes are overlapping and the style between the texts, for instance between *Discourse in the Novel* and *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* are obviously close, as can be seen by using the English and French translations. In his later career, he studied specific cases of written discourse where that dimension was pre-eminent, but in Volosinov’s *Marxism and philosophy of language*, the subject matter was mostly verbal interaction considered under the lenses of dialogism. Everyone seems to be agreeing that there is a great commonality between those writings and that they can be considered as being from the same “school”; I will align myself on that position here (Peytard 1995), which means both respecting the authorship of the persons and their collaboration in a kind of collective enterprise.

To say that all texts can be seen as dialogical describes the relation, most of the time in tension, between different elements. Bakhtin uses terms like polyphony, heteroglossia, the word seen as discourse in all its multiplicity. Centering on utterance, all acts of discourse are at the same time in tension between the unifying forces of language and the specific languages that comprise heteroglossia. All utterances come in a time and in a place (chronotope) and sometimes they express themselves in the carnivalesque, in a Rabelaisian context. Authorship requires exotopia, a point of view supposedly “outside”, even though in social interactions exteriority, while posited, cannot be total. We cannot have personal identity without alterity; no authentically personal expression is possible without the multiplicity of languages coming from a plurality of Others. At the same time, descriptions of literary forms in their transformation clearly have to do with social life.

### 2.1 Marxism and philosophy of language (Voloshinov)

From the very first pages of this book that discusses not forms of the novel but forms of human verbal interactions, a philosophical anthropology emerges: it is based not only on biological relationships with the environment, but also on signs, especially in the case of organized humans, living in a structured society. It is with signs that we act towards one another, we understand a sign by relating it both to a referent and to other signs. It is wrong for Voloshinov to see the individu-
al’s consciousness as the source of signs whether it is understood in an empirical or an idealist way.

Already for Voloshinov, meaning production or repression is social, intersubjectivity comes first, as was also explained in the “Voloshinov” book on Freud. A set of very basic and very difficult questions are raised by Voloshinov’s work, a man that lived in the USSR at its beginning, in the context of official and orthodox Marxism. For instance, what about the relation between infrastructure and superstructure? He explains that causality obtains here, but that it cannot be understood in a mechanistic sense. Words and characters in novels are also related to the whole genre of the novel, and to the social whole that is literature itself (Voloshinov 1973, 18); in other terms, they cannot simply be seen as effects of economic forces like class violence, etc. Discussing in particular the work of art, Clark and Holquist are synthesizing perspective: “Any theory of art must take into account three elements: creators, artworks, and ‘perceivers’. Formalists overemphasize the second category, while the idealists invest too much in the first and third categories (Clark and Holquist 1984, 202)”. A sociological poetics then has the study of social life as its specific object, expressed for instance in art works. Social psychology is to be understood not in terms of a reified social consciousness, but in terms or small utterances into which an indefinite number of others are situated, “little speech genres” that were not studied during his time (Clark and Holquist 1984, 20). A classification of forms of utterance follows from this, with a classification of forms of verbal communication at their source. Recognizing the hierarchical factor in the latter leads to a recognition of social conditions:

Therefore, the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization or the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction. (Voloshinov 1973, 21)

For Voloshinov in that book, there is no relevance of looking at psychology or other extra-social realities to ground there the general dialogic of relationships between individuals, groups, and types of language and other peculiarities of dialects, specialized groups, etc. Ideological phenomena are semiotic phenomena, they find their basic unit in the word – slovo which is both the single word and the discourse or group of words – and they appear and develop in interaction in organized human contexts.

2.2 Description and the aim of getting better

As we know, on the one side, researchers can aim to be extremely descriptive about dialogue phenomena, at least in certain cases while being inspired by Bakhtin’s theorizing (for instance, see the works collected in Weigand [ed.] 2009). His
influence was very important as a literary critic, and it is very influential in communication studies; his perspective inspired numerous studies in both these fields, where the direction seems to be for the most part descriptive (Kim 2004).

But we know it is not the only way to consider dialogue. In one other line of thinking, which started quite in the same period of time as Bakhtin’s, dialogue is a demand to which moral and even ontological issues apply. Martin Buber’s perspective (in Buber 1922) is an example of this. Without necessarily following or referring to Buber, it is useful and common to say that there is a normative tradition of looking at dialogue (see Johannessen 2008 or Arnett 1986).

Of course this also depends on what we put under the “normative” dimension, let us discuss this point from a practical philosophy perspective. For instance, even though dialogism in the buberian sense is a kind of appeal, that appeal remains something completely open, unnecessary, undetermined considering its possible applications. Openness to the Other, ability to listen closely; these are very general attitudes that can be done in many different contexts. But it says nothing about limit cases, for instance: can a person be thoroughly “open” towards an abusive spouse – the valid answer might be no. Some element might be “normative” without being imperative in all cases and always required. A general call to openness to the other does not decide in advance of what we should do in this and that particular circumstance. It does not function as a prescription telling us what to do, but rather as an appeal to enter a specific exchange that might, in certain situations, conduce interlocutors to invent solutions, etc. This is quite different from a so-called normative ethic that requires to find first principles that can be helping us directly in the analysis of situations and therefore in the choices to be made, like Principlism in bioethics or ecocentrism in a deep ecology perspective (Beauchamp and Childress 2012; Naess 1989). But on the other side, if we take the normative as a broader concept, including invitation, appeal, propositions and attitudes, than it would fit the bill. The normative might be understood as including not only the prescriptive and the mandatory but also the suggested and the optional (Peterson 2016).

With this in mind, it makes sense to recognize that dialogue has an ethical and moral dimension to it. It is a demanding process into which we are invited somehow to enter. In front of a dominating and manipulating power, it would not have to apply; in fact, a Bakhtinian approach might help us understand that our action will have to be correlative to its vis à vis, because the logic of interactions has force.

One excellent example of a very important theoretician in communication ethics having developed such a dialogic ethic but without this Bakhtinian aspect is Richard L. Johannessen (see Johannessen 2008 [1996], a book updated many times). Some people are developing a whole field of practice emphasizing dialogue as a way to think together and to surmount difficult situations where conceptions
and visions do not easily coincide (Bohm 1996). About since the same period, other people have started looking at dialogue as a way to develop not only a clearer consciousness of ethical issues, but also as a process by which to treat those issues by investing in a co-construction of ethical meaning (Létourneau 2014, 2012; Legault 1998). In fact, dialogical capacity might be called upon in a series of different contexts: in negotiation processes, in legal or commercial mediation settings, and probably also on environmental governance issues – even though there is a particular complexity involved in that case. One really important point then will be to avoid idealizing the situation or partners at the price of producing undesirable, adverse effects. With Bakhtin, we might better understand how for instance a negotiation setting might command specific norms of action, involving secrecy and gradual disclosure (among other elements).

Speaking about this tension between description and prescription, it seems that we encounter the old contradiction between “is” and “ought” that was deemed insurmountable. There are a few missing elements though: for one, the evaluative has to be distinguished from the prescriptive. If we “ought” to do something, it is always on the basis of some description that supposes an evaluative set of criteria that apply to the situation. There will be at least a certain element that is found lacking, either in part or completely, and maybe more than one. Criterion might give the basis for such a critique, but it does not follow that we will automatically obtain a prescription from those criteria. This already shows that the “is/ought” opposition might be an oversimplification. Furthermore, it is because we are already in a situation that is plural, potentially contradictory with tensions between values and discourses, that there is a need to evaluate and direct ourselves in a reflective way (Dewey, 1939). Admitting that dialogicity is already a characteristic of human thinking, speaking and acting does not mean that there is no way to get better at it.

First, we might ask whether the Bakhtinian analysis of literary and communication discourse understood as being dialogical and polyphonic can be coherent with such practical research aiming at bettering the dialogic character of language and communication. This question seems difficult, but it can be better understood in terms of relationships between different scientific endeavors. According to such a reading, the opposition makes sense only in function of some social distribution of tasks. If the question is considered from inside disciplinary perspectives, a task of integration would then simply have to be recognized as required. Taken in that sense, the answer can be a simple “yes”, since the question can be understood or reframed in terms of different tasks that complement each other without any contradictions. After all, isn’t it true that the same person can on one side, describe analytically some discourse and on the other side, try to better oneself in dialogue practices, or becoming better acquainted with these phenomena? If this is correct,
then the surmised “opposition” between those approaches could only be held in terms of faithfulness to some disciplinary orientation. In practice, we can easily pass from one stance to the next.

Let us look more closely at the apparent contradictions between these approaches, descriptive and so-called normative; for instance, one side of the discussion will say that monological discourse is basically impossible since all language is dialogic, while the other approach is going to say that language would better be dialogical instead of being monological. In one case, monologue is almost impossible whereas in the second, it is deemed to be too frequent or commonplace to be ignored, some choice of orientation being possible. Is there a way to reconcile those two perspectives, typified somehow by a certain view of the Bakhtin/Buber opposition?

This typological understanding might be an oversimplification, as can be seen by reading T. Todorov, who quotes a text signed Bakhtin that was published in French in the book titled *Esthétique de la création verbale* (Bakhtin 1984). It seems that for Bakhtin also, at least in some of his developments, monologism is an attitude of denegation of the Thou, a refusal of seeing that person as being another self, equal to the I: it is therefore clearly an expression by Bakhtin of an evaluative stance, a rejection of monologism seen as a posture that for him in this quote, is close to absolute idealism, embodied for him with exemplarity by Hegel. The quote will give place afterwards to a brief comment:

Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (thou). With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness. No response is expected from it that could change everything in the world of my consciousness. Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force. Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materializes all reality. Monologue pretends to be the ultimate word. It closes down the represented world and the represented persons.

(Bakhtin 1984, 292–293)

Even though Bakhtin is the author of this quote, it might as well have been Buber. Clearly here, a monological attitude could be equated with a limit case, some radical failure to recognize the other as a different conscience that would be seen as truly able to respond to someone, an Other that can be decisive for any individual. It confines anthropology to an individual’s interiority, in a radical solitude and a desert of relations to true others, the other being reduced to an object. Of course, this “monologuist” might deny the importance of others, but it does not mean that this particular speaker is not affected by some other, unrecognized, speakers. Also, this quote clearly shows that Bakhtin was far from banishing any evaluative
or prescriptive dimension of the dialogue/monologue distinction, even though the main focus of his scientific work was on literary forms that are carefully distinguished and analyzed (poetry, epic literature, the novel). Instead of an opposition, we can see a complementarity between description and normative appeals to dialogue.

3. Interdisciplinarity and complementarity

There is dialogue as a concrete exchange between persons, and, of course, actual dialogues could sometimes be better, for instance we can develop human relationships, and we can become more attentive and clearer in our expressions, etc. But let us not forget dialogue as it is expressed by terms like intertextuality, polyphony and other similar words, something similar to what L. Lipari referred recently, in a private exchange, as “dialogue as quintessence” or “dialogue as condition”; (see also Lipari 2012). This element reflects the fact that we are already in dialogues before trying to go forward in dialogue. This condition has to do with the simple fact that as social beings, we are already situated in a multiplicity of dialogues long before we are able to discuss them. I would say it is both a social, interactional and existential situation.

Dialogue is something that, when better learned and practiced, can be more socially fruitful and humanly enriching than if it were not cultivated (for instance, Johannessen 2008, and also Arnett and Arneson 1999). It is also often seen in many applied perspectives, as a way to build consensus or surmount disagreements. There is good reason on that account to focus in particular on the role played by contradiction in Bakhtin’s dialogism. It is the case that in many of Bakhtin’s analysis, for instance while treating Dostoevsky, tensions do come with different figures. In a sense, all the interest of his way of looking at dialogue is to take into account phenomena of disagreement.

In fact a (normative) call to dialogue does not tell us what to do in specific instances; it only suggests that to practice dialogue would be, at least in some cases, a better way to arrive at collective decisions, without telling us what these would be. This appeal to dialogue does not function in any and all situations, because it requires a lot of involvement from participants, that people might not be interested or ready to give. There is obviously also the difficulty represented by the quantity or number of eventual contributors to dialogue. In that sense, social cacophony is well illustrated in Bakhtin’s pages. There are polyphonic instances in the interplay of contradictions and social tensions involving ideologies, readable in the novel. Utterances are understandable only in relation to the other’s expressions: this does not preclude the fact that in human relationships, a self-reflective knowledge
about dialogicity is relevant and very useful, whether it be to conduct negotiations, mediations or other meaning construction enterprises aiming at some common good. Of course, all these different types of dialogue have their specificities and constraints.

This apparent discrepancy between the two approaches disappears when we consider the whole of Bakhtin’s writing: he knew Buber’s work, quotes it on occasion and shares with him the centering on the Other and on alterity, especially in his youth and his later writings (Todorov 1981). Bakhtin in his youth had strong interests for philosophy and even specifically ethics. He developed explicitly on the fact that the self is constituted by the other, as was recalled by Todorov, who also stresses the fact that this recognition of the other’s role as preceding and conditioning one’s own is not something totally new in the history of thought. Bakhtin’s mature works had to do with a scientific enterprise on literature, language, and communication. All the major concepts he developed were constructed in the actual work of analyzing, commenting and interpreting written works, mostly Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and afterwards Rabelais.

But this does not mean that his disciplinary positioning is limited to literary studies. His work can be seen either in philosophy of language, in the history of scientific accounts of language and text, and-or inside what can be called the science of literature, with a very specific and quite normal interest in Russian literature, for a man born while his country was the Russian Empire and who died in the Soviet Union. If we look at the whole of his works, objects of inquiry are explicitly philosophy of language, linguistics and theory of ideology (understood as sign phenomena). Without losing those kinds of interests, specialized works focus on literary creations; his major works on Dostoevsky and Rabelais. The book titled *Marxism and philosophy of language* is obviously broader in scope, and since it is poorly Marxist, a specific study could focus on the rhetoric of Marxism in Voloshinov to clarify further its understanding.

On top of the domain of literary studies in the different national languages, his work has proved relevant for researchers in many disciplines including linguistics, communication and discourse studies, philosophy of communication, of language and of interpretation. In philosophy as such, not much has been accomplished in terms of a valid reception of Bakhtin’s work. Some philosophers will recall, interestingly, Bakhtin’s relationships especially with the Marburg School: he was interested both by the works of Heinrich Rickert and by the global critique of the neo-kantians by Ernst Cassirer. For instance, what he writes about poetics and aesthetics can easily be read as a re-expression or new articulation of the idea of art as a symbolic form, in direct continuity with Cassirer’s philosophy, once we understand that this expression can be taken as meaning something else than just a new transcendental form (Cassirer 2009). But we still lack a precise study
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illustrating all this by proper examples and references throughout the work. The place of Marxism overall is still also an object of important discussions.

So if we focus on Bakhtin’s interest in language, ideological forms, genres, the novel, we have a program to study phenomena that pertain to what we can call human culture, human communication. It is very interesting to see how his first writings, and his last, had a clear tendency to operate a more explicit connection between anthropological and ethical issues. The intermediate work was related to professional aspirations on the part of a scholar that had extreme difficulties to get ahead in his career, and who was recognized only in the very last decades of his life. But the focus of his specialized research is not the betterment of human relationships, which is deemed possible by working on dialogue, at least according to some people.

3.1 Place of the author as individual: a unifying force

The basic notions seem to work very well if we think in terms of text analysis, especially complex ones like novels, and Dostoevsky for Bakhtin is quite extraordinary in that regard. But there are a couple of strange phenomena: first, there is a neutralization of the notion of ideology in his writings. For him, ideologies are semiotical, the idea in itself is not opposed to something else; in classical Marxism envisioned or not in a Leninist perspective, you would oppose true knowledge, as embodied in the science of material dialectics, and ideologies as being false images created more or less directly by the class structure to serve its interests (Boudon 1990). Second, an anthropological consequence seems to be to make the individual person’s interest disappear, we could recall here the “death of the author” (Barthes 1968). This is in great contrast with today’s requirements to be different, original, specific, to be personal, an element that can be more easily taken into account by referring to G.H. Mead than by referring only to Bakhtin. From a philosophical and anthropological point of view, we might in effect wonder if Bakhtin’s insistence on dialogue does not have as a side effect the potential disappearance of the individual.

Bakhtin’s conception is far away from the perspective, which became classical in Western thought, that situates the production of meanings as individual expressions of personal thought, or in terms of an externalization of what is interior (Grondin 1997).

In a way, this classical understanding of the individual’s role could be seen as “ideological” in a Marxist sense. Bakhtin might be criticizing this, producing as a social response a theory somehow pragmatically “adequate” to society, which is supposed to have made disappear individual interest at the sole benefit of the social whole. Of course, the problem is that this has been done while denying the
existence of elites that were still very much existing under Stalin, albeit in a very particular and submissive way. But we should recall that there is no “death of the author” in Bakhtin; the author’s role is instead to give voice to a plurality of meanings that animate and inhabit a shared social life.

He discusses *unfinalizability* because the self is constituted by the other, as the character in the novel needs the author’s *exotopia* to gain existence and completeness. But precisely this needs a strong and affirmed author. If we agree that consciousness is semiotical, and that semiotics is social and interactive, the question of personal identity could become a taboo of some kind. We could then put it to the account of the USSR’s collectivist political philosophy! He might have wanted to conform to a collectivist ideology. Another way would be to say that he needs to be complemented by other perspectives, for instance G.H. Mead’s idea of the Self as distinguished from the Me and the I. While adding to this the fact that more socialization is helping the process of individualization, and not the other way around, as was also shown by Georg Simmel. But it is a point of which he is quite aware:

The stronger, the more organized, the more differentiated the collective in which an individual orients himself, the more vivid and complex his inner world will be.

(Voloshinov 1973, 88)

This would logically imply that the more disorganized, the more undifferentiated social world goes with a poorer and less vivid inner world, which makes perfect sense. An important point: when Bakhtin discusses polyphony and other similar terms, most of the time it is to describe situations of tensions, not situations of harmony and intentional co-construction. In that sense, his concept of double-voiced discourse helps us understand how a character’s voice in the novel might be divided between dialects (Allen 2000, 25). At least in the novel, the author serves to unify all these tensions that are figured and represented, given voices in the strong sense of the term. As we know, the plurality in the novel includes both individual voices and forms that are given expression; the letter read for instance. These tensions expressed in the novel are also present for instance in the national languages, but there is no assertion as to some exact correlation between tensions and plurality of voices in language at large and those expressed in a given novel. There is certainly a relationship between these two interconnected levels of study and of practice, but they differ notably also. There is also the more general and constant tension between centralizing forces towards a unitary language and heteroglossia that characterizes all actual languages (Bakhtin 1981, 270–271). We find many different kinds of dialects inside this heteroglossia, but also socio-ideological languages of groups; professional and generic languages, languages of generations “and so forth” (Bakhtin 1981, 272). As we know, for him as long as a language is
alive, centripetal and centrifugal forces continue to develop. More than this, every utterance is participation to that diversity, as well as it is part of the “normative-centralizing system of a unitary language” (Bakhtin 1981, 272); that amounts to recognize that every utterance is “contradiction-ridden, tension-filled” of these opposing tendencies.

The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance. (Bakhtin 1981, 272)

Then on one side poetry was the centralization factor “in the higher official socio-ideological levels”, whereas at local fairs, buffoon spectacles gave space to clowns, in the world of street songs etc.; all languages were then ridiculed as masks. For this heteroglossia to have been dialogized means for Bakhtin the fact that it “opposed the literary language” as a unifying force, that it was polemical against “the official languages of a given time” (Bakhtin 1981, 273). The dialogic nature of language was a struggle between “socio-linguistic points of view, not an intra-language struggle between individual wills of logical contradictions”. This does not mean that a study of intra-language dialogue would not be interesting; on the contrary he posits that “the dialogic aspect of discourse” and associated phenomena “have remained to the present moment beyond the ken of linguistics”. Therefore, the author is in a position similar to those unifying forces that are at play more generally at the social level, constraining and unifying dialects of all kinds while expressing them. Individuals are the centers of perspective that keep these unified.

4. To conclude: Dialogue as a set of social possibilities

The easy way out of the apparent incompatibility between descriptive and normative research projects, as we saw previously, is to appeal to specific disciplines or sub-fields, while calling for exchanges between disciplines at the same time.

Let us go further if we want to situate more clearly dialogicity as some very general social characteristic of thinking, acting and, of course, speaking. A third dimension is required if we want to avoid polarization between norms and descriptions, as we discussed before. Dialogue certainly has some crucial role to play anywhere in social life, but for my part I would refrain using the term “essential” and equivalents because of its old metaphysical connotations. The word condition should also be used with caution, since it could be understood in a transcendental-Kantian sense. Let us express that, of course, positions that would table on essenti-ality or on transcendental thinking are still possible and might be viable options to
discuss further on. I surmise instead that the peircian Firstness category might be relevant to understand this supposedly “conditional” or “essential” character; this will require to resituate this discussion in a Peircean context.

As we know, for Peirce actual existence and contact is understood under the category of Secondness, determining “the action of the previous on the subsequent”, experience and effort, actual contact of any kind (Peirce 1955 [1905]; Misak 2013). Therefore, descriptions of dialogues as concrete exchanges, responses, traces of the language of the one in the other’s, would fit nicely at that level. It could embrace not only present, but also past phenomena, provided they are documented enough. Dialogue as Thirdness would then easily correspond to the normative, the relationship as it is envisioned in terms of Law, or as a requirement (Peirce 1998, vol. 1, 271; vol. 2, 497–499). It might also be posited as a kind of ideal to be aimed at under the general frame of Thirdness. We might then say that Dialogicity needs in all cases the Firstness or Possibility order, for it to be reflected in terms of actual and concrete interactions. The exchanges can also resurface in Thirdness as practical challenges that come as a task.

What are the consequences if we admit this tentative use of Peirce’s categories? What is given is actual instances of dialogue to be studied, eventually evaluated with the aim of getting better. Possibility already directs us towards theory and capacity. And to discuss in terms of capacity, we have to refer to a plurality of elements. On the one side, referring to some particular action and interaction contexts is necessary, because it furnishes us with the opportunity of contacts, discussions, disagreement and co-elaborations of meaning. And on the other side, a set of theoretical frames will be needed, to permit us to understand the regularity, characteristic, and desirability of dialogicity as such under a number of definite interpretive frame. But this further exploration will have to be done in a later paper.

References

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