Culture and dialogue: Positioning, mediation or style?

Cor Baerveldt*

University of Alberta, Psychology General Office, P-217 Biological Sciences Building, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2E9

ABSTRACT

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Dialogicality has become a key notion in current cultural psychology. Strikingly, whereas mediational and semiotic thinkers have developed the dialogical view by emphasizing the role of psychological *distancing* in semiotic and dialogical processes, dialogical self-theorists following the work of Hermans remain caught up in a perspective that naively privileges non-mediated interaction. In this article I argue that both accounts lack an adequate ontological understanding of dialogicality. In looking for an alternative, I will first discuss how Bakhtin offers a *spatial* account of dialogicality that is quite different from the positional account proposed by DST. For an ontological explication of the deep dialogicality underlying all signification, I will then turn to Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh and show how it allows us to see our embodied presence as always already part of a field of *divergences*, a carnal intersubjectivity, by which we participate in a particular style of being. I argue that the work of Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty allows us to recognize a *primordial dialogicality* in the stylized, poetic and deeply equivocal nature of human expression. This primordial dialogicality defies the logic of positioning and distancing and reveals a deeper entwinement of self and other, with different psychological and developmental implications than those of DST.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade dialogicality has become a core idea within socio-cultural psychology. Where on the one hand Dialogical Self Theorists have pointed out the polyphonic or multivoiced nature of the self in an attempt to overcome the dichotomy of the social and the intra-psychological world, cultural–historical psychologists in the tradition of Vygotsky have seen in the notion a way to extend Vygotsky's theory of the semiotic mediation of our higher mental functions. Almost all accounts of dialogicality in psychology are based on the seminal work of Mikhail Bakhtin and although there has been some discussion about whether Bakhtin's *dialogism* can indeed be married to the *dialectical* view of Vygotsky and the cultural–historical tradition (e.g. Cornejo, 2012; Matusov, 2011; Wegerif, 2008), most

theorists seem to agree that Bakhtin's thinking promises an enrichment or elaboration of the idea of semiotic mediation rather than an alternative. In recent years some theorists have even proposed a *semiotic dialogism* in an attempt to reconcile Dialogical Self Theory with Vygotsky's dialectic psychology (e.g. Hermans & Kempen, 1995; Leiman, 2002; Valsiner, 2005; Wertsch, 1991, also see Zittoun, 2014). Those attempts at integration, however, conceal the fact that both Vygotsky's dialectical psychology and Bakhtin's dialogical understanding of poetic meaning are often taken up in a very peculiar way, which, although perhaps reconcilable at a superficial level, sacrifices much of the depth in the thought of those thinkers. For instance, whereas the dialogism of Bakhtin offers indeed a lot to the cultural psychological understanding of sense-making, both semiotic and dialogical theories of the self have remained strikingly oblivious to the embodied practical embedding of dialogical processes, which is arguably at the core of Bakhtin's own thinking (see Cresswell & Baerveldt, 2009, 2011). Instead they focus almost exclusively on

* Tel.: +1 780 492 5263; fax: +1 780 492 1768.
E-mail address: cor@ualberta.ca.

non-situated interpersonal interaction and disembedded social and internal 'positioning' (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Raggatt, 2006, 2007, 2012, 2014). Even though recent contributions to DST have emphasized the concretely embodied and situational aspects of position exchange (Gillespie, 2010; Gillespie & Martin, 2014; Martin & Gillespie, 2011), most dialogical self-theorists following the work of Hermans remain caught up in a perspective that naively privileges immediate interaction and conceives of *situation* merely in terms of internal or external positional *space*.

Bakhtin, I argue, did not see dialogue merely as a matter of dynamic spatial positioning, but rather as a generative juxtaposition of entire forms of life. Furthermore, he was not alone in claiming that dialectical thinking is a thinking that risks losing the particular and the unique to the abstract and the universal. Before him, Bergson (1910/1889) had already critiqued Hegel for his inauthentic account of difference, which makes the particular and the unique only available through the mediation of the universal. Bergson in turn echoed a concern previously expressed by Herder and Goethe and carried on in the tradition of *Leben-sphilosophie*. Central in this philosophical undercurrent was an attempt to restore our contact with *life* as we live it, as concretely situated embodied beings. The trepidation was precisely with the kind of dialectics that conceives of the normativity of life only through the mediation of the conceptual.

Bakhtin was able to draw from a rich tradition, that besides Hegel and Marx included the *Lebensphilosophie* of Goethe, Dilthey, Simmel and Bergson, the neo-Kantianism of Herman Cohen and Ernst Cassirer, the phenomenology and philosophical anthropology of Max Scheler and the linguistic psychology of Karl Buhler. After Bergson and Bakhtin, attempts to liberate *life* from conceptual abstraction have been undertaken by such diverse thinkers as Bachelard, Canguilhem, Foucault and Deleuze as well as other so-called 'post-structuralist' thinkers (some of whom took Bergson and Bakhtin as direct sources of inspiration). Remarkably, all of the latter thinkers would turn away from the phenomenological notion of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) and the philosophy of consciousness in order to recover, instead, a notion of life as on the one hand historical and normative and on the other expressive of genuine difference and dialogicality. Yet, the post-structuralist revolution seems to have hardly affected DST, which instead seems to be content with its place in a rather selective history of American pragmatist and social constructionist thought. Thus, while DST has avoided being caught up in the intergenerational conflict between phenomenological and (post)-structuralist thinkers, it has also precluded the possibility of connecting its account of the self either to an articulate notion of life or to a rich understanding of the cultural–historical conditions of dialogical action. Indeed, for lack of an adequate dialogical ontology and in spite of its radical pretensions, DST remains a rather traditional branch on the tree of western personality theory.

Of course, the seeds for a more radical dialogical account of culture and meaning can already be found in the work of Bakhtin himself. In order to start recognizing Bakhtin's more radical dialogism, I will turn particularly to Bakhtin's conception of *space*, which, as I will contend, is quite different from the one adopted by Hermans and Dialogical Self Theorists. In this paper I will argue, however, that it is particularly in the later work of the philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) that we can find an attempt to bring the notion of dialogicality to its full ontological explication. Merleau-Ponty, too, offers what could be considered a spatial account of dialogicality, but his particular treatment of the problem of *difference* and *distance* sets his account apart both from DST and from semiotic or mediational accounts of signification. As a phenomenologist who attempted to connect the *sense* of embodied perception to the *sense* of history, Merleau-Ponty struggled with Hegel and Marx, but also with Husserl and Saussure in order to uncover a primordial dialogicality that is neither conceptual, nor propositional. His understanding of this dialogicality not as interpersonal exchange or spatial positioning, but as *style*, may serve as the basis for a deeper understanding of the relation between person and culture that remains faithful to the basic tenets of socio-cultural psychology.

2. Bakhtin: dialogicality as generative juxtaposition

In their foundational account of the Dialogical Self, Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon connect the notion of dialogicality explicitly to the problem of *space* and state that meaning should be considered as a kind of *movement* (see Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992). By emphasizing the spatial organization of meaning and signification, Hermans and colleagues put themselves in the growing company of those who understand meaning as an embodied affair (e.g. Johnson, 1987; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Indeed, as Hermans et al. remark, Bakhtin himself understood dialogicality in terms of its spatial organization. Yet, drawing instead primarily on Lakoff and Johnson's seminal work on conceptual metaphor (see Johnson, 1987), Hermans et al. intend to offer a new interpretation of James' classic distinction between the *I* and the *Me*, by proposing a conception of the self as a metaphorical *space*, in which the *I* can observe the *Me* as moving. Subsequently, they go on to propose a conception of the self as a "dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous *I* positions in an imaginal landscape" (p. 28). DST, then, is based on the idea that "The *I* has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a *voice* so that dialogical relations between positions can be established" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Leaving aside, for now, the question whether it is the *I* or the *Me* that is positioned in space, the more fundamental question is what conception of space is really at play here. After all, metaphorical space is supposed to be analogous to the 'real' space in which we move around as embodied agents. For Hermans and adherents to DST the spatial nature of the self entails primarily that the *I* can dynamically occupy multiple imaginary *positions*. Moreover, Hermans et al. believe that their positional theory of subjectivity is similar to the one advanced by Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty. I argue that this characterization is based on a fundamental misreading of both thinkers. Among other influences, Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty both offered a response to