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**The Dialogic Nature of Signs**

“Semiotics Institute on Line”

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**Dialogue and Alterity**

**Dialogue in “dialogue genre”, external and internal discourse,  
utterance, and individual word**

Dialogism indicates a situation of *involvement with the other*, of both active or passive involvement, which is not necessary involvement due to a choice, to initiative taken by someone who decided to get involved. Consequently dialogism is not only present in dialogue on a formal level. Indeed, formal dialogue may only be endowed with a low degree of dialogism, while discourse that is not dialogical in formal terms, namely that does not assume the form of a dialogue, may, in fact, be endowed with high degrees of dialogism. Dialogism is not only present in external discourse but also in internal discourse.

There is a necessary, inevitable relationship between dialogue and argumentation. Each time we reason, we do so within in the context of a dialogic relationship with another person, even when this other person is our own interior double self through which we evaluate the validity of a given argument. The problem of dialogue with the other does not only imply the problem of the other intended as another person, but also the other as internal double.

It is symptomatic that Peirce did not often directly examine the so-called ‘problem of the other person,’ that is, the problem concerning both the possibility of experiencing other selves

separate from the self who actually poses the problem, and the possibility of interpersonal communication. This is because Peirce continually dealt with this problem implicitly in his conception of the dialogic character of thought, and he found a solution in characterizing this process based on alterity. When Peirce did directly examined the ‘problem of the other person,’ it was to affirm that there is absolutely no ontological or meta physical bias in favour of thoughts or feelings that the self calls ‘mine’. Further, he claimed that the experience of the other self does not present a more complex problem than the one related to the fact that specific interpretant and interpreted signs are recognized as ‘mine’; those through which the ‘I’ becomes aware of myself. Interpretant signs permitting self-consciousness are related to the signs that they interpret on the basis of the logic of alterity.

The recognition by one person of another’s personality takes place by means to some extent identical with the means by which he is conscious of his own personality. The idea of the second personality, which is as much as to say that second personality itself enters within the field of direct consciousness of the first person, and is as immediately perceived as his ego, though less strongly. At the same time, the opposition between the two persons is perceived, so that the externality of the second is recognized. (Peirce, *CP* 6.160)

In Bakhtin’s view dialogue refers to the fact that one’s own word always alludes, in spite of itself, whether it knows it or not, to the word of the other. Dialogue is not an initiative taken by the self. As clearly emerges from the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, the human person does not partake in dialogue out of respect for the other, but rather and above all, in spite of himself. According to Bakhtin dialogue is not something we choose; on the contrary, we suffer dialogue, we are subjected to it. Dialogue is not the result of an open attitude towards the other, but, on the contrary, it is the impossibility of a closing to the other. This clearly emerges from tragic-comical attempts at indifference. Like Dostoevsky, Bakhtin too considers dialogue as the impossibility of indifference towards the other, that is, unindifference towards the other, even in the form of ostentatious indifference, hostility, and hatred. Even when unindifference degenerates into hatred, the other continues to count more than anybody else. This is exactly what the novel conceived by Dostoevsky aims to demonstrate when he renders ‘the dialogic sphere of thinking human consciousness’ accessible on an artistic level (see Bakhtin’s monograph on Dostoevsky, 1963)

In one of his final papers (1974, included in his 1979 collection), Bakhtin wrote that

The text lives only through contact with another text (context). We underline that this contact is a dialogic contact between texts (utterances) and not a mechanic contact of

opposition between abstract elements [...] behind this contact there is contact between people and not between things. (1979, Eng. trans.: 375)

The specific logic of the text takes the form of dia-logic, dialectics among texts. But dialogue does not simply involve a relationship among texts and discourses, but also among utterances. Dialogic relationships are possible not only among whole (relatively whole) utterances. A dialogic relationship is possible also inside any signifying part of an utterance, even inside the individual word, if we hear someone else's voice in it (see Bakhtin 1963 Eng. trans.: 184).

Thus dialogic relationship can permeate inside the utterance, even inside the individual word, as long as two voices collide within it dialogically [...]. (Ibid.)

Text, utterance and word are dialogic. But they deal with

[...] the word not in a system of language and not in a "text" excised from dialogic

interaction, but precisely within the sphere of dialogic interaction itself, that is, in that

sphere where discourse lives an authentic life. For the word is not a material thing but

rather the eternally mobile, eternally fickle medium of dialogic interaction. The life of the

word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another

context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation. In

this process the word does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from

the power of these concrete contexts into which it has entered. (Ibid.: 202)

On the other hand, dialogic relationships are also possible between language styles, social dialects, etc., insofar as they are perceived as evaluative positions, as linguistic expressions of different worldviews.

Dialogism in the utterance as a whole, or in its separate parts or in its individual words is also the effect of reserve, a certain distance taken from them by the author, and the forms of this dialogic relationship between the author and his own utterance, – irony, parody, detachment, critique – depends on the relationship with the author and his/her present or absent, imaginary or real interlocutors.

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Let us resume. Dialogism or opening towards alterity is present – intentionally or not, consciously or not – in the discourse genre of “dialogue”. It is present in exterior discourse, but also, at different degrees, in the individual utterance taken as whole, in its separate parts, in individual words, as well as in internal discourse.

More than this: dialogism is not a prerogative of discourse or of the verbal sign. Any sign situation, sign process, or *semiosis* is a dialogic process, and as such it presents different degrees of dialogism. This will be the topic of the next lesson.