Dialogics, or the Dynamics of Intersubjectivity

Beyond the physics or the metaphorics of meaning (discussed in previous lectures), there is the intersubjective aspect of signification that we ought to seriously consider. Outside the parameters of its objectivity, where language is perhaps structured like physics or even biology, and that of the collective constitutivity which we attributed to the cultural domain, there exists the discursive dimension of language which is essentially a matter of "l'homme de parole," to use an expression from Georges Gusdorf. We have seen that Maturana and Varela's view supports the perspective that language as dialogue is a process of increasing mutual accord or 'consensus' between individuals constructing a common cultural 'world' (Lecture 7). In addition to the physical and cultural worlds, there is also the human person who is also constantly attempting to structure the world according to his needs and orientations. In this constitutive structuring, she is always in relation with her neighbour. Discourse in fact defines this two-way course of the relation. Dialogue, from at least one point of view, is the mutual construction of the 'logos'. Language, far from being a self-activity, is a phenomenon *in-between.* In the words of Gusdorf, "in its essence, language is not of one, but of several. It manifests the relational nature of the human person" (Gusdorf 1952: 50). The human, in the strict sense, is not just *homo loquens,* but *homo interloquens.* "(T)he human is a being of relation, and this relational nature of the human reality is the most general condition of every instance of spoken communication" (ibid., p. 62-63).

Thus the juxtaposition of at least two individuals, the dependence of one on the other, is the condition of possibility of all speech. "Every time I take to

speech, what I say depends on the other towards whom my language is directed: indifferent, adversary, or friend or ally. Meaning is always the fruit of a collaboration" (ibid., p. 84).

As much as the objective and the constitutive worlds determine the referential, so also the nature of the encounter between persons determines the overall signification. The 'parole' specifies the nature of the relation constituted between the interlocutors.

Among the classical philosophers, Immanuel Kant had posed the problem of the relationship between the cognizing individual and her social world in terms of the notion of inter-subjectivity. He had also suggested the concept of *Entweitertes Denken,* to refer to a manner of thinking where the reason reflected the point of view of the other. In the Kantian perspective, communication serves as a kind of dialectical checking of the contents of a person's knowledge. The German romanticist philosopher of language, Wilhelm von Humboldt had echoed the same concern:

"With a clear and immediate sense of his immutable limitations, man is bound to regard truth as something lying outside him: and one of the powerful means of approaching it, of measuring his distance from it, is social communication with others. All speaking, from the simplest kind onwards is an attachment of what is individually felt to the common nature of mankind." (Humboldt, 1988 edn.: 57)

Karl-Otto Apel has revised the above Kantian problematic from that of a relationship between a subjectivity and the general consciousness to that of an *a priori communicational community.* For Apel, the shift from the *a priori* of a transcendental knowledge to the communicational *a priori* involves a semioticisation of the transcendental idealism of Kant.

Francis Jacques adopts a different approach to the problem. In his point of view, just as the spatio-temporal dimensions constitute the physical aspect of meaning, we can, in a similar way introduce a 'logical space of interlocution.' The latter space is also a neutral and dynamic space, a space of interaction between actual persons; it is characterized not only by the 'primordial conflict' or 'competition' that René Thom talks about (Lecture 2), but also by the 'confrontation' in the actual world. In other words it is a dialogical space.

A topology of signification or a 'morphogenesis of meaning' (in the sense of Thom and Petitot; see Lecture 2will remain incomplete unless the dialogical aspect is adequately accounted for. The physical-referential domain that emerges from a spatial substratum perhaps forms only the cognitive-structural side of meaning; it forms the 'delocutive' register of the discourse on the world. Additionally, there's the 'allocutive' register which according to Jacques, is linked with the '*a priori of* communicability,' i.e., the "condition of possibility of interaction and comprehension of meaning' (F. Jacques, 1985: 13-14). To understand what is 'consignification' or 'collaborative meaning' we may consider a 'communicative topology' installed by the confrontation in the world, of the interlocutors (Jacques, 1979: 29). We shall call 'interlocutive relations' the dynamic relations that belong to such a topology.

Though Jacques' suggestion of a topology of interlocutive relation is appealing, we may not agree with him in details. His central problem is that of "the articulation between a relatively autonomous allocutive register and the delocutive register of the discourse on the world" (ibid., p. 28). These two registers are characterized by the utterance *(énoncé)* and the enunciative *(énonciation)* modalities respectively. While the utterance modalities are 'related to truth, falsehood, doubt or certainty' of propositions, the enunciative modalities are a "matter of the confrontation of the propositional attitudes (between interlocutors), and mutually influencing

them in terms of questions, declarations, responses, objections, etc." (ibid., p.158). Jacques admittedly perceives the problem in a 'logico-pragmatic' framework.

We tend to think that it is more correct to approach the problem of modalities from a classical point of view. For the Port-Royal scholars, the modalities are concerned with the intellectual weighing of the contents of a proposition (subject vs. predicate), i.e., as the modulation of the copula in terms of possibility, existence, contingency and necessity. For Kant, possibility, existence and necessity are the modalities, and they belong to the table of logical categories. The classical modalities are thus a relation between concepts, effectuated by man's intellective activity. They, in fact, define the relation between man and the world as he *thinks* it to be. These modalities in a way correspond to Jacques' 'utterance modalities' but they do not participate in the interlocutive relation directly. Rather, it is a more rigorously defined 'enunciative modalities' that correspond to the interlocutive relations, and the former are commonly known as the 'modes' (moods). In our view, it is the grammatical category of 'modes' as content elements that aim at establishing and maintaining a relation of dynamic equilibrium between the interlocutors through mutual confrontation. We can say that the 'modes' tend to achieve "a progressive consensus by a confrontation of states" (Jacques, 1985: 126-27). In the main, they are involved in the production of the various sentence-types such as the declarative (indicative), interrogative, imperative, optative, precative, concessive, etc.

These 'modes' have a signification, Jacques correctly notes, only in the context of an 'interpersonal reciprocity'. The interlocutive relations are instituted and maintained by this reciprocity. Every act of speech has the potential to form and transform the interlocutive relations. The interlocutive relations thus constituted in speech are of two different types. In the

declarative and interrogative sentences, these relations concern the referential world. Here Jacques' term *referential dialogue* is appropriate. In the use of these sentences, the intended goal is a change in the *cognitive* state of one of the interlocutors. The declarative wants to inform, and the interrogative aims to be informed. Whereas, the imperative, the precative, optative, the concessive, the hortative, etc., aim at producing a change in the *physical* state of one of the interlocutors. However, the interlocutive relations are to be defined not in terms of the effects posterior to the utterance, but rather in terms of the '*a priori* of communicability', i.e., the conditions of possibility of consignification.

Humboldt had remarked on the *dialogical* nature of human language, and hence of man himself:

"suited to vocalization is the upright posture of man, denied to animals; man is thereby summoned, as it were, to his feet. For speech does not aim at hollow extinction in the ground, but demands to pour freely from the lips towards the person addressed, to be accompanied by facial expression and demeanors, by gestures of the hand, and thereby surround itself at once with everything that proclaims man human." (Humboldt, 1988: 56)

Outside the rationalist and romanticist frameworks, dialogics figure prominently in the psychology of Lev Vygotsky, in the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, and in the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. It is worth noting that these major representatives of contemporary thought have drawn sustenance from the intellectual currents of Russia of early this century.

Both Vygotsky and Bakhtin were seeking a socialist *via media* between 'pure naturalism' / 'abstract objectivism' on the one hand and 'extreme idealism' / 'individualistic subjectivism' on the other. They were also keenly

interested in elaborating the historically evolving character of language and other discursive practices. The main thrust of Vygotsky's developmental psychology was to invert rationalist's priority of language over thought. For him, "(T)hought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them." (Vygotsky, 1962: 125)

Following the Marxist perspectives of his period, Vygotsky gave importance to the material and social practices of man. The word or the basic verbal element is seen simultaneously as a sign and a 'tool', forming part of human activity in general. Developmentally, the child who is initially endowed with only a sort of 'pre-intellectual speech', later acquires the use of the linguistic tool from his immediate social/cultural environment for participating in its material and social practices. This primary mode of speech with which the child can at first manage rudimentary social communication later is internalized and becomes the 'inner speech' or thought. Vygotsky's views in this respect are formulated in terms of a debate with and a refutation of the position of the Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget. According to Piaget, the intermediate stage of a child's speech referred to as the 'egocentric speech' (where the child either talks to himself or communicates with an imagined interlocutor) situated between autistic and socialized stages of speech is something that (involutively) disappears along the developmental path. Whereas Vygotsky maintains that egocentric speech, instead of disappearing as Piaget believes it does, in fact bifurcates into the socialized speech and the 'inner speech'. In Vygotsky's words, "egocentric speech is a phenomenon of the transition from the interpsychic to the intrapsychic functioning, i.e., from the social, collective activity of the child to his more individualized activity a pattern of development common to all the higher psychological functions. Speech for oneself originates through differentiation from speech for others." (Ibid., p. 133)

For Vygotsky, the relationship between language and thought can appear in three different forms of associations: speech without thought or preintellectual speech as in chimpanzees and infants, thought without speech, which is the 'inner speech' developmentally formed out of the external speech, and the hybrid 'verbal thought,' which is the language proper. The verbal thought, which is effectively constituted on the basis of "a selective appropriation of the voices of others" is what really defines the human subjectivity, and not as in Cartesianism, a prelinguistic *cogito* made up of the universal *res cogitans.*

The ideas of the Bakhtin Circle centrally counter the linguistics theories of his times and lead up to a *dialogic* theory of literary texts. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* published in the name of Bakhtin's student V.N. Voloshinov, the dialogical and communitarian nature of the linguistic sign is thoroughly explored. "Signs can arise only on inter-individual territory," it says; further, "(they) do not arise between any two members of the species *homo sapiens.* It is essential that the two individuals be organized socially, that they compose a group (as social unit), only then can the medium of signs take shape between them." (Voloshinov, 1973: 12)

Bakhtin's attempt was to see language and ideology (seen as modes of thinking) as essentially social facts; they are neither grounded in the positivistic materialism of the behaviourist kind, nor in the idealism of the Cartesian or the romanticist kinds. Like Vygotsky, he viewed individuals as growing into, and drawing from a socially constituted intersubjective field of language and ideology. Bakhtin challenges the dominant epistemological view that there can be a single or autonomous consciousness, totally detached from the consciousnesses of others, and that there can be any speech that an individual produce on the basis of this (detached) consciousness. He differs from Vygotsky in this respect, since for the latter there can be an autonomous 'inner speech' or thought that is the property

of an individual. For Bakhtin, “consciousness is essentially multiple,” and “to be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself.”

Bakhtin’s starting point was an investigation of the process by which a speaker assimilates the words of other. Or more precisely, an investigation of the boundary between one’s speech and the speech of the others. One’s speech is always and already formed out of the speech of others, and it always seeks a response from other. (In a similar vein Jacques Lacan says: “what I seek in speech is the response of the other.”) According to Bakhtin’s analysis, there are two kinds of boundaries between the speeches of the self (authorial speech) and the speech of the other. In the first kind, the authorial speech reproduces the speech of the other, neutrally, objectively, and in all its (the latter’s) authority, as in ‘recitation’. In the second kind, the self’s speech penetrates the speech of the other with its own subjective orientations like sarcasm, pity, etc. Bakhtin’s ‘dialogic principle’ is essentially this interpenetration of the authorial and the other’s speech.

Projecting these ideas from linguistics to the domain of theory and history of literature, Bakhtin notes that the dialogic interpenetration can manifest in the form of the interaction / coexistence between two apparently distinct languages within a literary composition. Instances of such interaction, referred to as *polyglossia,* occurs in classical contexts where a text written in a classical language, such as Greek (or Sanskrit) has permitted the occurrence of a less dominant language, often for inducing humour, irony, etc. In the more recent history of literature, especially with the emergence of the novel genre, (which in Bakhtin’s view is the democratic form of literary discourse), it has become possible for multiple dialects and registers to intermingle freely within a text. This condition is referred to as *heteroglossia.* Furthermore, when an author allows his own voice/ ideas to enter into a contestatory relationship with the voices of his characters, we obtain a literary situation which is referred to as *polyphony.* According to

Bakhtin, Dostoyevsky is the prime exemplar of a novelist who employs the polyphonic literary practice.

Dostoyevsky was also the main inspiration for Levinas who, though of Lithuanian origin, was brought up on the staple of Russian and Hebrew literature. Levinas' dialogical ethical philosophy was developed largely in response to the German Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber's classic work *I and Thou.* Buber begins by saying that man's attitude to, or basic relations with the world can be understood in terms of the two 'primary words,' *I-Thou* and *I-It.* Of these, the primary word *I-Thou* is prior to *I-It.* The former is spoken in the 'original relational event,' and thus precedes, in 'a natural way', the mere I which results from 'visualization of forms.' The other primary word, *I-It* can only be posterior to *I-Thou,* and results from the separating out of the *I* from the latter relation. Buber expresses this essential distinction as follows: "The first primary word can be resolved,into *I* and *Thou,* but it did not arise from their being set together; by its nature it precedes *I.* The second word arose from the setting together of *I* and *It:* by nature it comes after it" (Buber, 1958 edn: 22). However, the *I-Thou* relation can degenerate into an *I-It* one, as when a person or an object is seen merely as a target of perception. Contrarily, every *I-it* relation can potentially become *I-Thou* one. For Buber, God is the eternal *Thou,* and since God is wholly the other, this is the only relation that is eternal.

Though Levinas acknowledges Buber's influence on his work, he has sought to redefine dialogicality in terms of the sociality of an ethical philosophy, as different from the latter's 'spirituality". Levinas seems to think that the ethical effort required for a more contextual I-Thou relationship is absent in Buber who in his view 'thematizes' this relationship. His critique of Buber hinges on three main issues: reciprocity, formality and exclusiveness that he identifies in Buber's notion of dialogicality. Levinas' maintains that

the I-Thou relation is not a reciprocal dialogue between friendly partners occurring in a pure formal space or in a ethereal medium. *I* am already obliged to respond to the call of the other, even before I-Thou relationship is established. There is an essential dissymmetry between the I and Thou in the sense that I am responding to the 'epiphany' of the face of the other. I am both poorer and higher than the other, because I am always ready to respond to the call of the other, and I regard my condition as more privileged than that of the other. The otherness of the other is not something *a priori,* but is constituted in the face to face encounter with the other. In Levinas' words:

"The originality of the (I-Thou) relation lies in the fact that it is not known from the outside but only by the I which realizes the relation. The position of the I, therefore is not interchangeable with that of the Thou. But, if the self becomes an I in saying Thou, as Buber asserts, my position as a self depends on that of my correlated and the relation is no longer different from other relations: it is tantamount to a spectator speaking of the I an Thou in the third person." (Levinas, 1989: 72)

Instead of reducing the other in a spatial sort of way to the sameness of me within a totalized whole (which would ensure the I-Thou reciprocity), Levinas would rather retain the radical otherness of the Other on the temporal dimension, which naturally opens out to infinity. Time's openness further ensures the non-closure of the I-Thou relationship. According to Levinas, "(t)ime means that the other is forever beyond me, irreducible to the synchrony of the same. The temporality of the interhuman opens up the meaning of otherness and the otherness of meaning." Thus we have an entirely new orientation the question of meaning and language. Levinasian preference is for a semiotics of saying over that of the said. Language as saying means for Levinas "an ethical openness to the other" (Cohen, 1986: 29). "*(S)aying* is irreducible to the ontological definability of the *said.* Saying

is what makes the self-exposure to sincerity possible; it is a way of giving everything, of not keeping anything for oneself." (ibid., p. 28)

Note

As an important factor in the context of interlocutive reciprocity, Jacques refers to "the parole in such as it forms and transforms the relation with the other, the parole considered as constitutive and even the foundation of intersubjective reciprocity." (Jacques, 1986: 115)
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