Chapter 3

WHAT IS AN UTTERANCE?

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"Things grasped together: things whole, things not whole; being brought together, being separated; consonant, dissonant; Out of all things one thing, and out of one thing all things."
(Heraclitus, 1987, fragment 10)

INTRODUCTION

Current developments in dialogical sciences, focused on understanding human mind and behaviour as a semiotic, dynamic, and socially interdependent process, are increasingly concerned with developing appropriate research methods. Recently, several efforts have been made, some of them broadly concerned with methodological issues enabling us to grasp dynamism and dialogicality of human semiotic processes (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2009; Salvatore, Valsiner, Strout-Yagodzinski, & Clegg, 2009; Valsiner & Sato, 2006; Wagoner, 2009; Wagoner & Valsiner, 2005), while others are committed to finding proper analytical tools and procedures (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010; Grossen, 2010; Josephs, Valsiner, & Surgan, 1999; Larraín & Medina, 2007; Linell, 2009; Marková, Linell, Grossen & Salazar-Orvig, 2007; Valsiner, 2005). Motivating these efforts is the idea that the scientific contribution of dialogical approaches to psychology and social sciences depends, to a great extent, on the relevance of their empirical research (Mininni, 2010).

According to Grossen (2010), dialogical approaches to human cognition and communication arise as a new disciplinary field "which takes human interaction as a research object" (p. 5). Consequently, discourse and language should be key elements of those methodological approaches meant to account for dialogicality of human processes (for a discussion on the diversity within dialogical approaches see Linell, 2009). However, although centrality of language and its potentiality for the study of psychological processes has been acknowledged by some dialogical approaches (Marková et al., 2007; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Billig, 1987; Leitão, 2000; Haye & Larraín, 2009; Mininni, 2010; Larraín & Medina,

2007), others have been more sceptical. Valsiner (2009) argues that in excessively attending to language in contemporary cognitive science "there is danger of losing the complex reality of human phenomena from focus if the primacy of affective processes is downplayed" (p. 10-11). Likewise, Gillespie and Zittoun (2009) highlight the irreducibility of thought to talk. However, as far as we understand, the different emphases among dialogical approaches concerning the role of discourse and language in the study of psychological processes are not rooted in a Scholastic division between those who support and those who are against the idea of reducing experience to language. What explains these different emphases is a diverse and (mainly) vague conceptualisation of language and discourse. The belief that there is a risk of overlooking affective or thinking processes if language is put at the centre, supposes a particular notion of the relation between affective processes and language, or between thought and language, that is neither clear nor shared among dialogical approaches (for a discussion of the notions of thought, discourse and language see Haye & Larraín, 2009; and Larraín & Haye, under review).

In order to have a fruitful discussion about methodological tools capable of grasping the dialogicality of human experience, it is crucial to conceptually elaborate the notions of language and discourse held: to open them up to discussion instead of 'sticking to them' as if they were clear and shared. Bearing in mind that social research always deals with discursive practices as its main data (at least according to Bakhtin, 1986a), the discursive nature of human processes should be made visible. It is neither necessary, nor desirable, to reach an overall agreement about the notion of discourse, but if human experience counts as discourse for other people and for oneself (Voloshinov, 1926/1976), we would not be able to apprehend it without an explicit theorisation of discourse. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to contribute to a theoretical understanding of the dialogical nature of discourse in order to provide insights for the development of proper discourse analytical tools. We attempt to do this by focusing on the *dialogical unit of analysis* in discursive practices.

REVISITING AN OLD PROBLEM

What is discourse? A conversation among two lads is discourse, despite their improper use of language. A written text is discourse, without oral speech. The thought unfolding while reading a text is also discourse, even if it is just an interpretation of the text. A self-dialogue is discourse, even if only one and the same living being is involved. A monological address to the people is discourse, even if there is no immediate response and no turn taking. Workers' silent coordination in a process of production is discourse, without overt words. The charming and enthusiastic chat around the fire is discourse, in spite of being a sort of chaotic crossing of multiple simultaneous conversations with no fixed parties. Given such a diversity of discursive practices, what unity is there to discourse?

In *Discourse in Art and Discourse in Life*, Voloshinov (1926/1976) shows that we do not need overt words to work in language, and that the extra-verbal situation plays an important role in communication. Voloshinov claims that the word as part of the living reality of verbal discourse, is not the same as the word understood as a lexical unit. Likewise, in *Towards a Methodology for the Human Sciences*, Bakhtin (1986b, p. 166) writes: "To a certain degree,

one can speak by means of intonations alone, making the verbally expressed part of speech relative and replaceable, almost indifferent." If lexemes and phonemes are not an essential ingredient of discursive activity, then we may ask again: What is the basic unit of language? If both the extra-verbal situation and the affective tones are particularly important aspects of language practices, as suggested by Voloshinov and Bakhtin, then: How should we conceive of discourse? What is to be taken as the minimal whole of discursive communication, such that the extra-verbal situation and the affective tones, as essential ingredients of language, are articulated as a unit?

The relevance of this question about language stems from the need to determine proper units of analysis in dialogical research. Discourse analysts have discussed the issue of the unit of analysis for a long time because of its crucial role in research procedures. This is especially the case for conversation analysts (see Linell, 1998; 2009), whose focus on verbal interaction has pushed them to discuss dynamic and social units of analysis that are different from the formal units of *langue*. Previously, Bakhtin (1981, 1929/1984) addressed the question about the dialogical unit of discursive communication in the context of novelistic discourse research, but also gave hints as to what a dialogical inquiry into any sphere of culture ought to take into account. For Bakhtin, the unit of discourse is the utterance. The specific questions are, then, how to conceptualise utterances so as to highlight their dialogic quality, and how to determine in each case the limits of an utterance so as to take it as a unit of analysis. These seem to be sensible questions not only for us, readers of Bakhtin or discourse analysts, but also for Bakhtin himself, since he dedicated one of his last publications, *The Problem of Speech Genres* (1986c), to discussing these issues. He struggles here with the problem of the unity of discourse and the limits of the utterance, in an effort to clarify why any utterance is crossed by the discourses of others, thus including multiple voices within itself, and at the same time is a response to others' utterance, thus expressing a unitary and singular positioning towards the other. When reading *The Problem of Speech Genres*, more than finding definite answers to these questions, one gets the sense that the author is posing the problem. The fact that Bakhtin did not offer a solution, and that we still discuss the question of the unit of analysis of discursive practices as a fresh issue, are to be taken as clues about the difficulty of the problem of determining a minimal unit of cognition and communication capable of conserving the dialogicality of the whole. In current dialogical sciences, the hard knots of the problems have been discussed in terms of the complexity of *alter–ego* interdependence (Marková, 2006) and of double dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1929/1984; Linell, 2009).

Within the realm of Bakhtin's work one can easily recognise a chain of conceptual links regarding the nature of discursive communication.[1] We read that language and culture are to be understood as living discourse, and not as formal systems (Bakhtin, 1986c); that the living unit of discourse is the utterance, neither the sentence nor the proposition (Bakhtin, 1986c); that each utterance is an unrepeatable event of interaction of different voices (Bakhtin, 1986c); that each utterance is a response to other utterances, so that it has a meaning in the context of other utterances pre-existing one's word, or anticipated in the shaping of one's word (Bakhtin, 1981); that the utterance is not a semiotic composition but the taking of a position of a speaking subject by means of such semiotic composition, so that it essentially implies an evaluative stand towards the other voices involved in the field of interaction (Voloshinov,

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[1]   We specially follow Bakhtin *Discourse in the Novel* (1981), *The Problem of Speech Genres* (1986c), and *The Problem of the Text in Human Sciences* (1986a), as well as Volosinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929/1986), and *Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art* (1926/1976).

1929/1986); and that these other voices, as well as the extra-verbal situation of the interaction, participate in any utterance as the social atmosphere that gives every word and position its particular ideological density (Bakhtin, 1981). These connections should sound straightforward to readers acquainted with dialogical sciences, and may sound reasonable for other readers even if not familiar with Bakhtin's work. However, such an account is not free from conceptual difficulties and important ambiguities, which should not be left aside in thinking about fundamental concepts of dialogical sciences such as utterance and discourse. As a matter of fact, Bakhtin's work does not give us a clear and consistent system of well-defined concepts, each with a single and fixed meaning. Rather, it seems to be open in regards to conceptual problems and strongly suggestive concerning a theoretical view of culture and language that creatively responds to the predominant and assumed order of concepts.

In what follows we discuss some key aspects involved in conceptualising discourse and utterances, guided by two sets of questions:

What does it mean to highlight the dialogical property of discursive practices? If we take the notion of utterance to name the dialogical unit of discourse, what is implied in a dialogical conception of the utterance? What is the precise role played by contestability and sociality in a dialogical account of discourse? If any utterance is an active response to other utterances, how do we grasp responsiveness in concrete discourse analysis?

What is the relationship between the positioning movements involved in any utterance and the field of other voices populating the utterance? Is the taking of a position of one speaking subject a part of the whole utterance, linked to other positioning movements and subjects? Is the extra-verbal situation the context that surrounds the utterance, or an inner component of the utterance? Are the other voices with which the utterance interacts, actual voices of the immediate others, of remote others, of imagined others, of oneself? How are these different voices interlaced in an utterance?

Along with exploring these issues, we try to offer a possible framework for answering these questions in an integrated way. In so doing, we directly draw on a number of Bakhtin's ideas, taken here as an opening moment of dialogism, but our elaboration is also in line with important previous ideas within current dialogical sciences (Billig, 1987; Goffman, 1975; Davies & Harré, 1999; Hermans, 2001; Marková, 2006; Marková & Foppa, 1990; Shotter, 1993, 2006; Wertsch, 1991; Valsiner, 2002).

ANALYSING DIALOGICALITY

The starting point of our discussion is Bakhtin's idea that the dialogic unit of discursive life is the utterance. However, this formulation is only a starting point, because even the term 'utterance' is predominantly employed to refer to non-dialogical phenomena. In developing our interpretation of Bakhtin's idea of the utterance, our first task is to differentiate a dialogical conception of the unit of discourse from other, not particularly dialogical approaches.

In dialogical sciences the voice 'utterance' has a special meaning; it is used to highlight, precisely, the dialogical unit of discourse. However, when the time comes to explain the term

in this technical meaning, one finds diversity and ambiguity. Surprisingly, the concept of the utterance seems unproblematic for contemporary scholars committed to discourse theory and discourse analysis. The discussion is often focused either on the difference between utterance and sentence (Tannen, 1989; Levinson, 1983; Searle, 1969) or on whether the utterance is the appropriate option as the unit of discourse when compared with other alternatives (see Linell, 1998). It seems that the problem of the utterance appears only as a practical issue when scholars are confronted with the task of analysing concrete discourse, but this task is not accompanied by a theoretical clarification of the concept. Even dialogical linguists such as Linell (1998, 2009) recognise the vague use of the term in language and communication sciences. In this fuzzy context, the basic property implied by the notion of utterance, shared by different formulations, is the *interdependence* of each utterance to another. Such is, then, our basic clue in exploring dialogicality (Marková, 2003). But if we just define the utterance as interdependent acts of discourse we are walking in circles, because it remains to be explained how and why acts of discourse are interdependent.

According to our reading, Bakhtin's notion of the utterance must be distinguished from other notions such as statement, linguistic expression, and speech act, just to mention a few. We will not discuss them all here, but simply point out a general difference. For Bakhtin, the utterance is always a response to other utterances, which are also responses to other utterances. Likewise, for Vygotsky (1934/1999) the word is not possible for one but it is possible for two. In this sense, it is the unit of sociality. To put it differently: The word is an encounter with the other. Here the terms utterance and word are used with the same sense, referring to discourse as an event realising social encounters. Consistent with a dialogical approach, all these references emphasize otherness as central to discourse. On the contrary, notions such as linguistic expression, sentence, proposition, phrase, or speech act, do not imply in themselves an encounter with the other. Even if an expression becomes contestable within a concrete discourse stream, what we need to understand is not the expression in itself but the process of being contested. Hence, these notions do not allow us to account for the *dialogical* unit of discursive activity. Let us analyse this concept by examining three of its critical aspects.

Responsive and Contestable

One could state that utterances are dialogic units of discursive activity in the sense that they are interdependent, such that each utterance offers the *possibility of responding to it* (Bakhtin, 1986c). For instance, in current dialogical sciences it is frequent to see that the notion of utterance is understood as an active response, in opposition to the notions of word or sentence, referring to the minimal lexical and grammatical composition determined by a given language structure (see also Bakhtin, 1986c). Acts of discourse, including the comprehension of any given text, are essentially meant by Bakhtin and Voloshinov as responses to other acts of discourse. With this idea of utterance as active response, the living and creative quality of any act of discourse is fore-grounded. Bakhtin (1986b) talks about the utterance and about the work of art as an active response by a *creative speaking personality*, in contrast to a mechanical reaction by a *voiceless thing*. "Any utterance is a link in the chain of speech communion. It is the active position of the speaker in one referentially semantic sphere or another" (Bakhtin, 1986c, p. 84).

However, one could also state that linguistic expressions, sentences, or speech acts are dialogic units of discursive activity as far as we accept that in discursive activity such units are interdependent because each expression, sentence, etc., offers the *possibility of responding to it* (Bakhtin, 1986c). Despite being a correct conceptual clue for many purposes, we argue that this explanation of utterances as active responses does not yet disclose the distinctly dialogical nature of discourse. For it would again be possible to think that single phrases or verbal expressions that are produced as responses to previous or anticipated phrases, are thus basic acts of discourse. The focus would still be the phrase, the semiotic expression, and not the event of responding-to, not the process of linking one phrase to another. Hence, what we need is to disentangle the dialogic nature of discursive activity from other aspects eventually involved in discourse, as linguistic expressions and speech acts sometimes are. Recall that Bakhtin and Voloshinov have suggested that such kinds of things are not essential to discourse. To be clear, each utterance is a response, but so is the verbal expression articulated in the utterance, the gestures involved in the utterance, the speech act performed, the position taken by the speaker, the emotional tone expressed, and so on. What remains to be explained is the dialogic process that makes a phrase or gesture a responsive expression, because the very responsive and creative movement will not be in focus if analysing expression or speech act, their form or type. What is missing is the perspective of the movement of social encounter that takes place, even if there is no understandable expression or clear speech act. The technical meaning of 'utterance' in dialogical sciences is precisely meant to keep our attention focused on the living process of engagement among responding gestures, phrases, sentences, expressions, or speech acts. Our point here is that this necessary emphasis on responsiveness does not go far enough, because the responsive quality of discourse acts does not illuminate how each utterance becomes a link of an "organised chain of other utterances" (p. 69).

Situated and Unrepeatable

One step further would be to conceive of the utterance as the event of responding to another *in context*. In this way, one may think that the text or linguistic expression, and the context or situation of the expression in relation to other expressions, form the basic unity or minimal whole of discourse. In understanding a simple statement, for instance, one cannot but take into account the context that gives it a meaning. As the quote from Bakhtin below illustrates, the content and form of the linguistic expression, in its responsive character, is inextricably conditioned by the surrounding points of views.

> "The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically additated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, waves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile." (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276)

From a dialogical point of view, though, one must take care not to think of the unit of discursive life as the compound of linguistic expression plus its context, because even the notion of a contextualised responsive statement implies a static quality. In this connection it

seems important to recall that Bakhtin (1986b) criticises the static and closed notion of cultural unit that was, or is, typically used to interpret the meaning of the works of art in relation to their immediate context. The dialogical environment of a given utterance is not given as a static surrounding that receives and holds a responsive linguistic expression. Rather, the very context is already a responsive environment.

> "The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a social specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogical threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the object from the sidelines." (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276-7)

It is precisely because of this living and changing nature of the situation to which an utterance is an active response, that each utterance is unrepeatable, historically unique (Bakhtin, 1986a). What is missing in an expression + context compound is the dynamic nature of the relationship between the utterance and its situation, being the former a rejoinder to a sort of ongoing conversation made up from other rejoinders. As such, each utterance modifies the ongoing conversation in which it is situated. The very notion of discourse calls attention to the event-like nature of language, its being a living process, a process of change, of alteration. Discourse and utterance do not refer just to the *use of language*, or the *text in action*, but to language itself as the process of thinking and speaking, as *language practice*. In other words, language is thought of as a movement rather than a thing, as a transit rather than a state, as activity rather than as potentiality.

Dynamic and Embodied

A third step would be to conceive of the utterance, in line with its living condition, as the *event* of responding to another in a given context, in contrast to the semiotic composition – the sentence, the phrase, the gesture – that takes place. As events, utterances are processes of change in themselves, not fixed forms that happen to take place in a particular space-time point. As a matter of fact, the term 'utterance' has the advantage, if any, that it immediately calls to mind the verb 'to utter' and makes one think of the act of uttering a statement or a question, so that we can easily distinguish between the linguistic expression or speech act, on the one hand, and the event of uttering or generating it, on the other. A given concrete utterance is thus said to embody linguistic form. But again, how do the multiple responsive events or occurrences of linguistic forms become a chain of discourse communication? There is nothing in the notions of response and of event in themselves that explain why utterances are interdependent rather than parts that are added to a discursive chain by means of external glue. Rather, from a dialogical point of view each utterance as such is the act of social bonding, of joining one subject with another, one perspective with another, one position with another. When someone answers a question, she is not only articulating an answer-like expression just after the question-like expression, but she is realising the movement of answering to such a question, thus *joining* in a particular way an answer-like expression to a question-like one. Again, it is not enough to conceive of discourse as an event; it is necessary

to think of this event as an event of social interaction: "Dialogic interaction is indeed the authentic sphere where language lives" (Bakhtin, 1929/1984, p. 183).

INTERLACING SUBJECTS

In our view, then, the utterance is neither the sign uttered nor the act of uttering the sign, but the *rising* of a new perspective from a previous one, contesting or complementing a given perspective with a response. To put it graphically, one may imagine two statements, one responding to the other, thus generating a chain where each statement counts as a link. It is easy to think that the analytical units of discourse are such links. However, we propose that, consistent with a dialogical approach, the unit of discourse is each engagement among statements, is the point of juncture between the links of the chain, not the links themselves. Indeed, the metaphor of the chain and the links can be understood as representing the fact that, within a course of dialogical responses, an utterance is a bond that ties together the position taken in a previous moment with a new position; and another utterance may bond to the latter position, as it is taken by the speaker, with an even newer position.

This interpretation of Bakhtin's concept of the utterance includes the responsive, contextualised, and dynamic aspects, but emphasises sociality. It finds support in a number of critical ideas posited by Bakhtin about the utterance in *The Problem of Speech Genres*. Note that the first time Bakhtin refers to the utterance as a unit, he writes "a *real unit of speech communion*" (1986c, p. 67; italics in the original). The term 'communion' refers to co-participation, thus emphasising social bonding as the as the nature of discourse. This emphasis is also strongly present in Voloshinov's work.

The Changing of Subjects

Also consider that, with the model of a conversation among two speakers in mind, Bakhtin mentions the change of speaking subjects as one of the crucial determinants of the limits or borders of an utterance. This may be thought of as simply referring to the turn-taking movement in typical conversations that cut discourse into expressions or semiotic compositions that take place between one change of turn and another. What we would like to stress is the idea that the utterance essentially involves a *change* of speaking subjects. The utterance is not strictly what takes place between one change of turn and another, but as the *process* of changing the place of the subjects.

> "The boundaries of each concrete utterance as a unit of speech communication are determined by a change of speaking subjects, that is, a change of speakers. […] The speaker ends his utterance *in order to relinquish the floor to the other or to make room for the other's active responsive understanding*. The utterance is not a conventional, but a real unit, clearly delimited by the change of speaking subjects, which *ends by relinquishing the floor to the other*, as if a silent dixi, perceived by the listeners (as a sign) that the speaker has finished." (Bakhtin, 1986c, p. 71-72; emphasis added)

Finally, consider a related idea: The change of speaking subjects does not only refer to a

turn-taking shift, but at the same time to a transformation of the listener subject into a speaking subject.

> "The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. [...] And the listener adopts this responsive attitude for the entire duration of the process of listening and understanding, from the very beginning—sometimes literally from the speaker's first word [...] Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker." (Bakhtin, 1986c, p. 68)

Polyphony and Contestability

A surprising implication of the concept of the unity of discourse we are putting forward is that one single utterance may be said to involve several statements, at least two. This is how we understand, following *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Bakhtin, 1929/1984), the polyphonic condition of utterances. The utterance is, then, in this view, the articulation of different positions, not just the statement of a single position. For example, when answering a question delivered by a partner, the speaker moves from the position implicated in the question to a new position. The answer is not just the statement of the new position, but the putting together and making a distinction between the two positions involved. As another example, consider the silent reading of a written statement. Bakhtin suggests that the mere understanding of a text involves the initiation of an utterance, because dialogical understanding is a responsive understanding (Bakhtin, 1981). For each comprehension is already a position taken by the reader, within her inner discourse, towards the position expressed in the statement. The crucial role played by the speaker *as* reader or listener can be traced back to Bakhtin's formulations of the very concept of responsiveness, which was our notion of departure:

> "The first and foremost criterion for the finalization of an utterance is *the possibility of responding to it* or, more precisely and broadly, of assuming a responsive attitude to it (for example, executing an order)." (Bakhtin, 1986c, p. 76).

The possibility of responding to an utterance, which is the dialogical core of any utterance, does not belong to the expression or sentence but to the listener or reader. Any utterance takes place as a complete unit firstly in the attitude awakened in the speaker that is listening to it and responding to it. The dialogical idea of responsiveness, then, does not refer just to the possibility that an expression, sign, or gesture may have within a discursive flow, but specifically to the possibility that a speaking subject may actively understand it, taking a position towards it. Only when this happens is the possible utterance completed, thus becoming a unit. Put differently: an utterance is resolved as a unit only by the other (this other being another speaker or the very author of the utterance at a second moment). According to Bakhtin and Voloshinov, each utterance is the semiotic articulation of an ideological position towards previous and future utterances. This means that an utterance is completed only when it becomes contestable by another utterance, a moment that does not need to coincide with the semiotic finishing performed by the author. The moment of contestability may come even

before the articulation begins, as is the case of anticipated utterances. Moreover, it seems reasonable to argue each utterance is never effectively a complete utterance, because every movement towards defining the ending border of another's utterance is also, at some point, contestable.

Utterance as Open Unit

The idea of the utterance as the responsive changing of subjects has some important implications for the dialogical analyst of discourse. Each utterance is an occurrence with no clear limits, no precise beginning, no definite ending – for its boundaries are not determined by itself but are set by the other. Thus, on the one hand, an utterance is only virtually a complete utterance. Another way to put it: an utterance is an *open* unit – a notion that Bakhtin develops regarding the analysis of utterances in distant cultures, and regarding the notion of cultures *as* utterances (Bakhtin, 1986b, 1986d). This idea imposes important demands on any analysis of utterances, particularly in regards to the place the analyst gives to the speaker's process of interlocution. On the other hand, in addition to this virtual totality, each utterance can always be interpreted in its actual occurrence as incomplete, as part of a larger movement, as when Bakhtin asks about the position held by the author of novels along and across his whole literary production, suspecting that each single novel is not properly a complete utterance. Each position that is eventually being taken emerges out of a multiplicity of signs, gestures, movements that are also positioning movements on a different scale. At root, a single gesture, sign, or word, is a matter of discourse as soon as it is a response to another's positioning (including one's own previous or even anticipated positioning movements). In analysing a text, formal aspects of narratives can be interpreted as local expressions or phases of a larger positioning movement, pieces that build with each other, forming a new movement at a higher scale, and then another higher scale, until the speaker trying to understand the text reaches a contestable reconstruction of the narrative. Thus, the utterance in a given narrative was the global positioning movement as it was comprehended as a whole by the other, that is, as it was contestable as a complete utterance. Again, this has important implications for analysis, particularly regarding the attention of the analyst to her own response towards the speaker's positioning effort, for the analyst cannot avoid the role of the other that understands.

The general idea that a single utterance involves at least two statements or positions is, despite its difficulty, consistent with several other theories arguing that the unit of discourse is social interaction (van Dijk, 1997), communicative event (Linell, 1998), or shared activity (Rommetveit, 1992). According to these views, discourse is essentially mediated by otherness. On the one hand, these supporting approaches may help overcome a terminological disadvantage of Bakhtin's notion of the utterance, namely, that the term utterance in plain English does not refer to inter-statement articulation but to single statements. We should bear in mind this atypical meaning of the term within the theory, and lacking a better term, keep it. On the other hand, one advantage of the Bakhtinian notion of the utterance is that it emphasises that the work of the utterance is to put together the positions of *alter* and *ego* and, at the same time, generate the difference that makes the latter a response to the former. To meet and to split as faces of the same event of being. Juncture and diversion. For each utterance is simultaneously the encounter and the difference with the other. We will explore these two facets of the utterance in terms of the complementary notions of position-taking and

interlocution field.

POSITIONING

Following Voloshinov's idea in several passages of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, utterances are sometimes said in current dialogical sciences to essentially involve the taking of a position of someone towards something. The notion of *active* response, as different from mechanical response, means that response in discourse is creative positioning. Further, the concept of position-taking is important because it implies that:

Each utterance involves an attitude, evaluation, and an affective accent. It is neither neutral nor context-free.

Typically, each utterance expresses one main evaluation on the part of a single speaking subject, so that the semiotic composition of words and gestures can be recognised as a unitary process of positioning, despite the multiplicity of voices or positions called upon.

A position-taking movement is not a position, a location, but rather an effort towards holding a position. Because efforts are not always absolutely successful, utterances are typically incomplete and erratic, thus demanding the speaker's work and commitment.

However, there are several problems to address regarding the concept of positioning (cf. Davies & Harré, 1999; Hermans, 2001). For instance, it is not clear whether positioning is the same as the utterance, if the latter is the expression of the former, or if positioning is a component part of the utterance. The risk involved in explaining the utterance simply as a positioning is forgetting that every utterance is the engagement among several position-taking movements, and then analysing concrete discursive practices in a sequence of single positioning acts, leaving the unity of social encounter in the background. Another related problem is that, as an evaluative positioning effort, any utterance is not just a judgement about an object, as if it were a definite position taken, but the feeling of a movement and the emotion of that movement in interaction with other voices or positions.

This discussion involves several problems that we will not unpack here. We will only point out that evaluations are not about objects, but about previously evaluated objects, thus, about other evaluations, other positioning movements. Perhaps utterances are emotional events only because they are an encounter with these other position-taking efforts, other subjects. Following our previous discussion, it is possible to argue that neither the position taken nor the event of taking a position fully account for Bakhtin's notion of the utterance as the basic unit of discourse. A position is always to be taken in front of other positioning movements either present as actual voices that one's positioning movement responds to, or anticipated in one's positioning movement as virtual responses to one's movement. In fact, each position-taking movement is not to be analysed as an isolated process but as a process that takes place in a field of interdependent position-taking movements (see above quote of Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276-7). The concept of positioning thus needs to be developed jointly with that of interlocution field.

FIELD OF INTERLOCUTION

The notion of the utterance is typically understood with the model of a positioning movement as responding to a preceding position. To understand the notion of the utterance in all its complexity as the unit of discourse, however, it is important to note that typically utterances do not respond only to a previous utterance but to a web of virtual positions, past or future, that surpass the immediate positions of the actual others. Typically, utterances also respond to more or less distant positioning movements by oneself or another, as well as one's own and another's positions which are merely imagined. All these other positions or voices draw a web that, within a given utterance, plays the role of a discursive environment for one's position-taking effort. Bakhtin describes this environment as "made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments—that is, precisely that background that, as we see, complicates the path of any word toward its object" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 281).

This environment, however, is not an external context, but an inner component of one's utterance. According to Voloshinov, the role played by the extra-verbal situation of interlocution is not that of an outer space containing several speaking subjects, but that of a context that operates from within. Voloshinov (1926/1976) and Bakhtin (1986a) emphasize that situational factors do not stay in the exterior, influencing the utterance; rather, the semiotic and rhetorical aspects of the situation enter into the utterance itself, becoming a constituent part of it, determining both its form and content.

Consequently, we conceptualise positioning, as entailed by each utterance, not as an isolated process but as taking place in a field. We employ the term 'field' because of its reference to the notion of a whole constituted by tensions, as in the case of magnetic fields. In the case of the utterance, we argue that positioning is performed within a dynamic constellation of perspectives with which a locutor establishes interlocution. This interlocution process is configured by tension among perspectives, because perspectives are interested ideological stands. In other words, positioning takes place in a tissue of convergent and divergent interests that constitutes a problematic conflict of interests in the here and now of the utterance. The field instigates the speaker to taking a position that may eventually resolve the impasse generated by the crossroads of interests. In this context, every utterance is like an effort towards solving the impasse in one way or another, favouring in different possible ways one interest or another.

The notion of field is meant to account for the assumption that utterances are emergent totalities bonding together a multiplicity of speaking subjects and subjective perspectives, thus essentially involving sociality. In breaking down this social totality, such parts or parties loose their interconnectedness. In this sense, utterances are joints as well as the articulated parts thus joined. Overall, this property means that speaking and understanding ought to be explained in terms of part-whole dynamics, in terms of putting together and mediating the conflicting multiplicity, in terms of union and differing – a kind of dynamic that may also describe the job of *logos* (see epigraph above).

Utterances as Historical Events

As a whole, the discursive field of any utterance consists of a complex audience, part of

which is the alien perspective that, in the form of a second party (*alter*), is confronted as a direct, more or less concrete interlocutor. Another part is a tacit audience that, in the form of a third (*alter ego*), plays the role of an 'apperceptive background', either as a generalized other or as an intertwined multiplicity of alternative perspectives. Thus: "Each dialogue takes place as if against the background of the responsive understanding of an invisibly present third party who stands above all the participants in the dialogue (partners)" (Bakhtin, 1986a, p. 126). As suggested by contributions that explore the role of third parties (e.g., Marková, 2006; Marková et al., 2007; Linell, 1998, 2009; Salgado, 2006), the field of interlocution of any given utterance must be analysed not only as a perceptual field, that is, as a scenario within which a second party is disclosed as an object, but also as a complex social *milieu* that gives positioning towards the other a particular ideological density and multivoicedness.

Games, Moves, and Rules

The idea of position already calls for the idea of a space in which to recognise the position. One may even think of a board-game whose possible positions are given by the structure and rules of the game, and the actual positions are taken by players within such possibilities. In the case of utterances, we interpret Bakhtin to be saying that positioning is the discursive construction of a perspective or point of view from which other possible perspectives are appraised. At first glance, one may apply the board-game metaphor to point out that positioning movements, like game moves, are strategic changes in the course of social interaction that respond to previous moves and that, in turn, provoke a next move, all taking place within a field of interlocution. As a matter of fact, every utterance relates to a complex set of conventional discursive resources and shared knowledge, as well as the dispositions of interlocutors, that come from past interactions between perspectives adopted by speakers in a group or in a personal history. These given conditions of the utterance provide a structured platform where a position is to be taken.

Singularity and Emotion

However, the metaphor is limited in the sense that, in the case of utterances, the interlocution field is not fixed, as the rules of a game are. It is extremely important to acknowledge that the interlocution field, where a position is taken, is transformed during the dialogic process of discourse; in other words, the field is re-created, or appropriated, by each utterance. The platform of each positioning is a part of the utterance, as the positioning itself is another part, and as such it does not have stable boundaries nor a rigid structure. If one insists on the metaphor, then discourse would be a game whose rules are modified with each move.[2] Consequently, as a general idea we would like to stress that the utterance re-articulates the field of interlocution given by history and the new position created within this field, thus carrying out a historically singular event of discourse.

Take, for instance, the emotional atmosphere of an utterance. The past experiences of positioning, thanks to a particular work of memory, are carried to the here-and-now of the utterance in a more or less undifferentiated fashion, so that the mass accumulation of such

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[2]   It is interesting to note that Wittgenstein's notion of *language game* implies that discursive practices can be regarded as games, involving a sequence of moves on the part of interlocutors. The fact we are stressing here, namely, that discursive activities are like games with no fixed rules, is consistent with Wittgenstein's discussion of the (problematic) role of rules in social activities among speakers. See *Philosophical Investigations* (1953/1997).

experiences takes presence as the emotional atmosphere of the interlocution field. The locutor is responding with a particular emotional tone within the context of such atmosphere, as if her positioning effort were to produce an affective resonance against the background of the field.

The Topic Dimension of Interlocution Fields

Apart from the emotional atmosphere, other aspects of the interlocution field must be mentioned, especially the stylistic resources such as a *discursive repertoire* (Potter, 1998), the cognitive resources such as *themata* (Marková, 2003), and the rhetoric resources such as *common places* (Billig, 1987). In this context, we understand speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986c) as a set of compositional, representational, and positioning resources that, coming from the past thanks to the work of memory, gives the utterance a specific type of semiotic shape, of semantic possibilities, and of evaluative background. Thus, the field carries a know-how concerning pertinent discursive devices, taking place as the compositional features of the utterance, its form; it carries knowledge about relevant objects that may become thematised, determining the representational content of the utterance, its theme; and, most importantly, carries an heritage of *topoi*, that is, of arguments, viewpoints, stands, types of reasoning, and accumulated conclusions more or less available to the speaker as tactics and strategies for her positioning work. Overall, the field carries a situated, continuously negotiated, and partially shared background of understanding. Heterogeneity of the field is not reduced to the fact that different voices, perspectives, or interests meet. A field is dynamic and heterogeneous also because it is composed by different *topoi* or (common) places, each partially shared with different interlocutors and differentially activated along with a discursive flow.

Both content and form, as well as the emotional tone of the field, are historical products of social interaction. In this sense, the objects thematised or the positions recruited in an utterance are not just things there, independent of the dialogical process, but sedimentation of human practices. According to Bakhtin (1986a), objects are not voiceless things but crystallisations of previous voices and their interaction. Consequently, utterances are not just evaluative positions towards an object but also towards a previously evaluated object.

> "The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme […]. Only now in its contradictory environment of alien words is present to the speaker not in the object, but rather in the consciousness of the listener, as his apperceptive background, pregnant with responses and objections. And every utterance is oriented toward this apperceptive background of understanding, which is not a linguistic background but rather one composed of specific objects and emotional expressions." (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 281)

Summing up, the concept of interlocution field is important because it implies that:

Each utterance takes place in a situation, in a crossroads with other utterances.
The situation of each utterance is made up of tension, that is, of multiple interests among which there might be different degrees of correlation and conflict.
The evaluative attitude and emotional tone of each utterance is recognised against an

affective background carried by the other participating positions.

Each utterance, taking place in a chain of discursive communication, comes with a past, whose fragments are preserved and crystallised by memory processes in the topic structure of the situation and its emotional atmosphere.

The Problem of Multiplicity

This concept of field may solve a paradox that arises when considering positioning alone. On the one hand, as we stated regarding our conceptualisation of positioning, each utterance typically expresses one evaluative position on the part of one speaking subject. On the other, as the very idea of interlocution field implies, in each utterance multiple positions and positioning efforts participate—at least that of *ego,* the author of the utterance, and that of *alter,* the listener or reader, the 'second' in interaction. How is the semiotic composition of words and gestures recognised as a unitary process of positioning, despite the multiplicity of voices called upon? Which of the positions participating in an utterance is the dominant voice, setting the tone of the whole utterance? Our interpretation of Bakhtin is that polyphony, which does not preclude unity, nevertheless poses a problem in understanding multiple voices as giving shape to one global positioning movement. At this point, one could take different theoretical routes. Following Bakhtin's emphasis on the creative nature of utterances, our answer is that the voice that sets the tone among an ongoing conversation of voices is the new one. That is, the position or voice that determines the evaluative stand, the favoured interest, the specific accent of an utterance is the one that is not present in the recent past of the field, the one that produces the "surprise effect". The positioning effort, in contrast to the positions or voices populating an utterance, is an effort towards changing the field of voices given. Of course, a concrete "surprise effect" is only recognised against a background of lasting positions. The field of interlocution brings the past to the utterance; the positioning effort makes the difference. The effect of an utterance is a transformation of the field of interlocution. If the positioning effort is minimally successful, the effect is a recognisable change in a certain direction, either favouring or disfavouring the listener's previous position. Therefore, each utterance is a predominant positioning tendency, even if built up from multiple and incongruous partial positions, as far as a creative re-articulation of these partial positions is recognised by the other.

Together, positioning and field, as two dynamically connected faces of the utterance, account for the idea, stressed by both Bakhtin and Voloshinov, that each utterance is thus unrepeatable, historically unique, a concrete piece of an ongoing discursive chain of replies. Each utterance is a movement within a singular history of replies pertaining to a given group of living beings, a given social environment, a given language, and a given set of ideological possibilities. This singularity is rooted in the historicity of discursive life, that is, in the fact that each utterance, or positioning, necessarily produces a modification of the script being socially constructed. Even if the semiotic composition of a given utterance consists of a silence, the whole field of interlocution is changed so that a further utterance cannot be the same as the one just prior to such speaking silence. The inner dynamics of each utterance among positioning and field is precisely a process of creatively transforming the situation of interaction. Thus, in analysing utterances it is important to focus not on identifying repeatable forms or contents but in discovering their singularity. Likewise, analysing the dynamics of

positioning and field in any given concrete utterance may help in discovering its singularity.

CONCLUSION

What is an utterance, then? We have described the utterance as an event of becoming; as an active response; as a position-taking towards other positions; and as an encounter with the other. This means that each act of discourse carries out an operation of social bonding. To stress the importance of a dialogical approach to discourse, we would like to radicalise the idea by stating that the utterance is the basic unit of social life. For each utterance not only articulates different perspectives but also multiple subjects. Discourse joins them and divides them. Hence the utterance is the unit of discourse *because* it is the unit of social life. In other words, the advantage of a dialogical approach to language is that discourse becomes conceptualised not as a marginal, partial, or occasional phenomenon within our life processes, but as a process of becoming that directly imports to concrete social phenomena, radically pertaining to our experience with others.

A theoretical clarification of the notion of discourse is important for orienting any kind of discourse analysis and, moreover, any inquiry into both subjective and social processes if it is assumed that these are discursive in nature. Thus, Bakhtin suggests that any methodology for the human sciences must take into account some fundamental problems stemming from the acknowledgement of culture as discursive communication (Bakhtin, 1986a, 1986b). In this context, we have tried to interpret Bakhtin's notion of discourse, building upon his rather unconventional theory of the utterance as the unit of discourse. In so doing, we went beyond the text of Bakhtin himself, gathering notions from other developments consistent with a dialogical approach, in order to sketch a conceptual account of the components of the utterance and its basic dialogical dynamic. Specifically, we propose to conceptualise utterances in terms position-taking within interlocution fields, thus accounting for the articulation of the given and the new that is essential to the discursive process of becoming.

Grossen (2010) has recently stressed "the difficulty of developing methodological tools that are fully consistent with dialogical assumptions" (p.1), that is, the difficulties of accomplishing the demands related to dynamism and social interdependence that a dialogical theory of discourse imposes on research methods. According to our point of view, such difficulty is also due to the fact that some key theoretical concepts are underdeveloped. For example, in the cited paper the author brought our attention to the apparent contradiction present in Bakhtin's notion of dialogical word, because "from a dialogical stance, we have to assume that some pieces of discourse are 'more' dialogical than others or are even monological" (p. 12). Here, Grossen (2010) points out a crucial theoretical problem that might have an impact on the way we use discourse analysis and other research tools. Accordingly, we have argued at the beginning of this chapter that theoretical problems like this should not be overlooked. We would like to end by illustrating the implications of our approach in terms of this particular problem—showing that it helps understanding how dialogicality does not exclude monologism.

We propose to understand the utterance as the movement of bonding two or more positioning acts, so that the discursive field in which a given position have been taken becomes reorganised. It is a dynamic process. On the one hand, this discursive field, whose

configuration changes along with the raising of a position or evaluative stand, is sometimes more open to diversity ("centrifugal force" said Bakhtin), sometimes more homogeneous ("centripetal force"). One may say that fields are not only made up of tension, but also by a sort of "spin" or acceleration factor. On the other, the positioning movement that transforms the interlocution field in one way or another, might favour centrifugal or centripetal forces— to keep Bakhtin's metaphor. This idea allows us to overcome the contradiction between acknowledging dialogicality as the essential property of utterances while, at the same time, recognizing the possibility of a "gradation" of the dialogical condition in an utterance (i.e., from monological utterances to dialogical ones). Yet, within the conceptual framework proposed in this chapter, it is impossible to conceive of utterances as composed by only one stance or perspective; there should be at least two. Rephrasing Vygotsky's claim: The utterance is possible for two, but not for one. However, the configuration of voices within the landscape of an utterance could offer different degrees or levels of inner dialogisation (for this concept, see Bakhtin, 1981). At the extreme, sometimes realised in scientific discourse, an utterance may involve an effort to deny its internal heterogeneity or to push away its addressees towards an infinite distance or future, generating the effect of a seemingly single, pure, unitary voice. In focusing on the dynamic process constituting the utterance, the dialogical analyst would be better prepared to track this kind of discursive strategy, which is frequently involved in 'de-dialogising' accounts (Potter, 1996) and processes (Billig, 2006). For instance, in talking of dialogical science in singular, we might be pushing towards 'monologisation' of a dialogic field (see Billig, 2011; Wagoner et al., 2011).

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