

AUGUSTO PONZIO: A BRIEF NOTE ON THE “ITALIAN BAKHTIN”

1. *Introduction*

The link between dialogue and knowledge was established in the ancient world by the great teachers and philosophers of that world, from China to the Middle East, from north to south, east to west. It is probably the oldest implicit principle in history of how we gain understanding, and its validity is evidenced by the fact that it is still part of education and most forms of philosophical inquiry in all parts of the world today.

Studying what dialogue is, therefore, is no trivial matter, if indeed it constitutes a powerful format for the construction, discovery, and acquisition of knowledge. It was used by Socrates, after all, in the form of a question-and-answer exchange as a means for achieving self-knowledge. Socrates believed in the superiority of dialectic argument over writing, spending hours in the public places of Athens, and engaging in dialogue and argument with anyone who would listen. The so-called “Socratic method” is still as valid today as it was then, betraying the implicit view that it is only through the humility that comes through dialogue that it becomes possible to grasp truths about the world. Through dialogue, in fact, we come to understand our own ignorance, which entices us forward to investigate something further. There really is no other path to understanding than the dialogic one – so it would seem.

The modern-day intellectual who certainly understood this like very few others of his era was the late Russian philosopher and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). For a long period of time his ideas remained virtually unknown outside of Russia. Through English translations of his works (Bakhtin 1981, 1986, 1990, 1993a, 1993b) the situation has changed drastically, with “Bakhtinian theory” now being applied to everything from philosophical inquiry to pop culture studies (e.g. Clark and Holquist 1984, Holquist 1990, Morson and Emerson 1990, Vice 1997, Farmer 1998, Hirschkop 1999). This Bakhtinian turn in academia has been propelled in large part by semioticians like Augusto Ponzio, whose own works on

Bakhtinian dialogue (e.g. 1986, 1993, 2005, 2006) constitute a truly monumental achievement in their own right. Like Bakhtin, the world is starting to react with enormous interest to Ponzio's take on, and elaboration of, the ancient concept of dialogue, both within philosophy and semiotics.

The purpose of this brief essay is to bring more attention to Ponzio's contribution to the concept of dialogue, since I believe that he is leading the way forward to a better understanding of how semiosis unfolds as a primarily dialogical act, rather than as an individualistic Cartesian act of self-reflection. In a fundamental sense, Ponzio has taken over the torch from Bakhtin, shedding light on where the dialogic path is leading. This essay is offered, in effect, as a succinct tribute to the "Italian Bakhtin" on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday.

2. *The dialogue*

Dialogue goes on all the time in human life. It is so instinctive and common that we hardly ever realize consciously what it entails in philosophical and psychological terms. It manifests itself in conversations, chats, and even internally within ourselves. As the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1962, 1978) showed in his pioneering work on childhood development, "internal dialogue" surfaces in early childhood as a means for the child to come to grips with the nature of language and its cognitive functions. In effect, when children speak to themselves as they play, they are engaging in true investigative dialogue, testing out meanings and concepts as they are imprinted in the phonic substance of words. Dialogue also manifests itself in the theatrical and narrative arts, from drama and comedy to poetic texts of all kinds. It is a linguistic act that requires an ability to understand both the nature of information and the role of human participation in shaping incoming information into usable knowledge.

It was Plato who introduced the systematic use of dialogue as a distinctive form of philosophical discussion and inquiry, tracing its roots to the mime, which Plato admired. Except for the *Apology*, all of Plato's writings are constructed in dialogical form (to greater or lesser degrees). After Plato, the dialogue was relegated primarily to the literary domain,

although it is said that Aristotle (Plato's pupil) wrote several philosophical dialogues in Plato's style, none of which, however, have survived. The dialogue was revived somewhat by early Christian writers, especially St. Augustine, Boethius, and somewhat later by Peter Abelard. However, under the powerful influence of Scholasticism, the dialogue was replaced by the more formal and concise genre of the *summa*, or synthetic treatise, of which the most spectacular is, needless to say, the one by the great medieval theologian St. Thomas Aquinas.

The dialogue was reintroduced into philosophical inquiry by various European philosophers starting in the late seventeenth century. For example, in 1688, the French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche published his *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, contributing to the genre's philosophical revival. The Irish prelate George Berkeley employed it as well in his 1713 work, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. But perhaps the most important use of the dialogue was by Galileo in his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* of 1632. The dialogue continues to be used by philosophers and scientists who perceive the give-and-take of its structure as a natural format for common people to come to grips with complex issues of existence and truth.

The Platonic dialogue, which unfolds mainly between Socrates and someone else, is constructed to evoke disagreement on some belief, so that such disagreement can be resolved interpersonally. The typical resolution path sees Socrates inveigling his partner to consider certain other beliefs until a contradiction is reached with the disputed belief by implication. In this way, the interlocutor is made to accept the untenability of his or her initial belief or hypothesis, and to consider some other hypothesis, which is then, in turn, also subjected to the same process of dispute. Most of Socratic dialogues, therefore, are not resolved – as in real life. The importance of this form of inquiry has been known and applied in literature, philosophy, and science ever since. From Augustine to Martin Buber in philosophy, and Galileo to David Bohm in science, it has always been used as means of making the communicative instinct in humans a powerful vehicle for gaining understanding and knowledge.

3. *Bakhtinian dialogue*

Mikhail Bakhtin made many important contributions to modern philosophy and semiotics, from the concept of the carnivalesque to the restoration and elaboration of the Platonic dialogue. His concept of the carnival has become especially relevant in several areas of contemporary media and communication studies. The festivities associated with carnival are tribal and popular; in them the sacred is “profaned”, and the carnality of all things is proclaimed through the theatricality of carnival spectacles. At the time of carnival, everything authoritative, rigid, or serious is subverted, loosened, and mocked. It is little wonder, therefore, that pop culture studies are now turning to Bakhtin for insight. Carnival is part of popular and folkloristic traditions that aim to disrupt traditional connections and abolish idealized social forms, bringing out the crude, unmediated links between domains of behavior that are normally kept very separate. Carnavalesque genres satirize the lofty words of poets, scholars, and others. They are intended to fly in the face of the official, “sacred world” – the world of judges, lawyers, politicians, churchmen, and the like.

As Ponzio has often pointed out in his insightful writings on Bakhtin, it is the Russian’s view of dialogue as legitimizing the Other in the process of self-understanding and in the construction of true knowledge that stands out as perhaps Bakhtin’s most significant accomplishment. Bakhtin saw the struggles that common people face, especially those in understanding each other, as reflected in language and best recorded by the novel genre.

Bakhtin introduced his extended concept of the dialogue around 1929. For Bakhtin the Self cannot possibly remain “neutral” in matters of ethics and morality, because these are wrapped intrinsically into one’s own “voice of consciousness”. Language thus betrays what and who a person is (or aspires to be). It is in dialogue that this comes out in a conspicuous manner. Indeed, through dialogue we come to understand that there exist three main facets of consciousness – namely, the “I-for-myself”, “I-for-the-Other”, and the “Other-for-me” facets. The first one is an unreliable source of self-identity. On the other hand, it is through the “I-for-the-Other” perspective that human beings develop a true sense of self-identity, because it is this form that constitutes a means through which we incorporate the views of Others as models of who we are. Conversely, the “Other-for-me” perspective is the way in which Others incorporate perceptions of other people into the construction of their own self-identity. Identity, in this Bakhtinian framework, is a shared Gestalt, not an individualistic mode of

consciousness. For this reason, individual people cannot be “finalized”, that is, completely understood, known, or labeled, as is the tendency of social scientists to do. People change and never really fully reveal themselves in the world. Moreover, every person is profoundly influenced by others in an inescapably tangled way, and consequently no single human “voice” can be said to be isolated. It is always part of a “polyphony” of voices. For Bakhtin, therefore, carnival is the context in which distinct voices can be heard, and where they will flourish through polyphonic expression. For Bakhtin, therefore, carnival is the basic form of human dialogue. People attending a carnival do not merely make up an anonymous crowd. Rather, they feel part of a communal body. At carnival time, a unique sense of shared time and space, in fact, allows individuals to become emotionally involved in a collectivity, at which point they cease to be themselves. Through costumes and masks, individuals take on a new bodily identity and are renewed psychologically in the process. It is through this carnivalesque identity that the “grotesque” within humans can seek expression through overindulgent eating and laughter, and through unbridled sexual behavior.

Dialogue occurs spontaneously during carnival and, in line with its grotesque and polyphonic nature, it is highly “heteroglossic”, that is, highly tied to shifts in meaning, which are a product of people’s sensitivity to context and situation. In conversing, people discover who they are.

4. *Ponzio’s take on the dialogue*

In a series of truly remarkable works, Augusto Ponzio (1986, 1993, 2005, 2006), a linguist and semiotician, takes the Bakhtinian dialogue one step further, seeing it as a means through which we discover not only who we are as individuals, but also who the Other is and, ultimately, what humanity is all about. In so doing, Ponzio has initiated a true dialogue within philosophy and semiotics – a dialogue on the importance of dialogue in the process of semiosis and understanding.

The traditional goal of semiotic theory has been to figure out how signs are constituted and how they encode referents. The theoretical frameworks developed by Ferdinand de

Saussure (1916) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1931-1958) stand, to this day, as the standard ones for pursuing this objective. The implicit tenet that motivates all research in semiotics is that knowledge and representation (the use of signs to encode concepts) are inextricably intertwined. The world of human beings is a *de facto* world of signs, the thoughts they elicit, and their overall organization into a system of communal meaning that we call a culture. It is precisely the interplay of signs, thought, and culture which generates consciousness – the state of mind that provides humans with a means for making sense of who they are and of where they are in the cosmic scheme of things. Ponzio would add that we come to this consciousness by “discussing ourselves”, so to speak, with others during dialogue.

The crucial insight to be gleaned from Ponzio’s writings, in my view, is that the basis of discourse within human is narratological, whether we are consciously aware of this or not – i.e., it unfolds in story-like fashion, thus imparting a sense of sequentiality to the ideas it contains that impart, in turn, a sense of causality, to the ideas themselves and, ultimately, to the makers of the ideas (the interlocutors). The reason why dialogue is so powerful, therefore, is that its hidden narrative structure is felt unconsciously to reflect the structure of real-life events.

The study of narrative structure in semiotics proper can be traced to the work of Vladimir Propp (1928). Propp argued that a relatively small number of “narrative units”, or plot themes went into the make-up of a universal “plot grammar”. Propp’s theory would, in effect, explain why stories seem to be similar the world over and why we tell stories to children instinctively. Stories allow children to make sense of the real world, providing the intelligible formats that give pattern and continuity to their observations of daily life. In effect, they impart a sense that there is a *plot* to life, that the *characters* in it serve some meaningful purpose, and that the *setting* of life is part of a meaningful cosmos. By age four or five, children are able to manage and negotiate narratives by themselves, especially during play, when they create imaginary narratives designed to allow others watching them a framework for interpreting their actions.

Bakhtinian theory is, in a way, an expansion upon Propp’s ideas. The stories inherent in dialogue are brought to bear on the situation and on models of self-identity. Ponzio takes this notion one step further by claiming that we enter into a narrative dialectic each time we

converse, exchanging signs and their meanings, and thus creating new senses to these signs. As the Estonian semiotician Jurij Lotman (1990, 1994) argued, we create the semiosphere at the same time that it crystallizes before us through interaction. Socrates and Plato certainly knew this. So did Bakhtin. And so does Ponzio. Ponzio argues that studying cultural systems is equivalent to studying how people produce, use, and modify signs during conversation. A sign selects what is to be known and memorized from the infinite variety of things that are in the world. Although we create new signs to help us gain new knowledge and modify previous knowledge – that is what artists, scientists, writers, for instance, are always doing – by and large, we literally let our language “do the understanding” for us. We are born into an already-fixed semiosphere that will largely determine how we come to view the world around us. Only through dialogue can we really change this situation. Dialogue is thus liberating because it provides the semiotic resources by which individuals can seek new meanings on their own. As a result, human beings tend to become restless for new meanings. There is no change in the world without dialogue.

5. *Concluding remarks*

On the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday, the Italian Bakhtin merits a place in the semiotic spotlight. Augusto Ponzio has been instrumental over the last few decades, not only in bringing Bakhtin to the attention of semioticians, but also in developing a truly insightful semiotic theory of the dialogue. The time has come to bring attention to Ponzio himself. His works impart a “broader picture” of what dialogue allows us to do in gaining knowledge of the world. There is no doubt, to my mind at least, that Ponzio’s concept of the dialogue as a means of understanding semiosis provides an exciting agenda for conducting future research that is truly interdisciplinary and apt to produce interesting and meaningful results. The most attractive aspect of Ponzio’s idea is that it allows us to use a standard format for studying semiosis in all its manifestations as an interconnected multi-dimensional phenomenon.

It is interesting to note that among the first to suggest the study of knowledge as a dialogical semiotic process was, as briefly mentioned above, another great Russian – the psychologist Vygotsky. As Vygotsky found in his study of children, signs invariably mediate

knowledge and mental functions. As Davydov and Radzikhovskii (1985: 59) observed several decades ago, unfortunately the “studies of the sign mediated nature of mental functions have not developed further” since Vygotsky. Not much has changed since then, as semiotics continues to play a virtually nonexistent role in the mainstream human sciences. Hopefully, ideas such as those being put forward by Augusto Ponzio will show why a paradigm shift in this area of human intellectual activity is long overdue.

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