Implications of the Subject's Ontological Statute in the Bakhtin, Medvedev, Vološinov Circle's Discursive Theory / *Implicações do estatuto ontológico do sujeito na teoria discursiva do Círculo Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshínov*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the dialogical ontology from a Bakhtinian perspective for this is an essential topic linked to subjects' agency in the context of dialogism. From this acting definition emerges a conception of language that is the basis of the Bakhtin, Medvedev, Vološinov Circle's theory of enunciation. Thus, one intends to examine here the implications of the statute of the subject in Bakhtin's philosophical theory and its resulting application in the Circle's enunciative theory, which makes necessary to explore the philosophical bases of the Bakhtinian architecture as regards the dialogical principle, the conceptions of identity and intersubjectivity, social evaluation, the ethics of responsibility and the relationship among subjects. One aims to show that sense, resulting from enunciation, has to do with the ontological statute, understood as a social and historical one, of interacting subjects.

KEYWORDS: Dialogism; Dialogical ontology; Statute of the subject

RESUMO

Propõe-se neste artigo abordar o que se refere à ontologia dialógica em perspectiva bakhtiniana por ser um tópico essencial relacionado ao agir dos sujeitos no âmbito do dialogismo. Da definição desse agir decorre uma concepção de linguagem que embasa a teoria da enunciação do Círculo Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshínov. Assim, pretende-se, aqui, examinar as implicações do estatuto do sujeito na filosofia da linguagem bakhtiniana e sua consequente aplicação na teoria enunciativa do Círculo, o que torna necessário explorar as bases filosóficas da arquitetônica bakhtiniana quanto ao princípio dialógico, às concepções de identidade e intersubjetividade, à avaliação social, à responsabilidade ética e ao relacionamento entre os sujeitos. Pretende-se demonstrar que o sentido advindo da enunciação é da ordem do estatuto ontológico, de cunho social e histórico, dos sujeitos em interação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dialogismo; Ontologia dialógica; Estatuto do sujeito

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Life by its very nature is dialogic
To live means to participate in dialogue.
BAKHTIN

Introduction

Bakhtin's dialogical ontology is not a topic Bakhtin or his peers have explicitly discussed nor proposed. But, reflecting about their works, we are brought to think about this, for his ontology is constitutively linked the Bakhtinian theory of enunciation, chiefly because of its being centered on the subjects' agency and their social and historical relationships and because their theories present a very peculiar conception of this agency.

The intrinsic linkage between the subjects' statute and the theory of enunciation seems to be the foundation which assures the dialogical theory and analysis' unique statute among extant theories of enunciation, as well as their productivity, both alone and dialoguing legitimately with compatible proposals and other theoretical perspectives. The dialogic proposal implies that subjects, even before they enunciate, have their utterances already altered by the others they are addressed to.

This points to the fact that no one could be able to duly understand the revolutionary statute of Bakhtin's theory of enunciation without understanding what the statute of subjects is inside it, for the conception of language derives precisely from this statute. We are thus allowed to argue for the idea that no notions or concepts of a given theory should be used with no commitment to this theory foundations or without dialoguing with it as regards convergences or divergences, if one subscribes to another theoretical position; a dialogue among theories is only legitimate if differences are not disregarded in the name of some non-proved similitudes.

We may say that, for Bakhtin, the dialogical contact among subjects, a contact by means of which they become subjects, is not always a place of harmony or a place where some subjects necessarily dominate other subjects, but a place where there is an undecidable tension of *in situ* negotiation of identity, or rather of identifying, which is a never-ending task. So, to talk about subjects and identity for Bakhtin is entering a dangerous territory, the one of *so-bytie* (the event of being-with), which is both something that happens when subjects are born and a task they do from birth to death.

Utterance in Russian is a composite expression, *so-bytie vyskazvanie*, that is, utterance uttered by some enunciator, a concrete utterance (SOUZA, 1999), a non-repeatable event of a being, *bytie*. Sense is born from enunciation and not from linguistic forms, and because of this we must insist, one cannot understand what subjects utter or their uttering without understanding their statute as such. Our aim here is examining the implications of the ontological statute of subjects in the Bakhtin, Medvedev, Vološinov Circle's enunciative theory.

Bakhtin and his peers' proposals are part of a centuries-old anti-Cartesian tradition in which Kant also stands tall. According to Pires (2012), ever since I. Kant Kant put into doubt the Cartesian philosophic precept of consciousness (pure reason), the subject has been contingent to facing the precariousness of identity, since this latter is denied by others. Bakhtin in fact maintained a long dialogue with Kant (cf. e. g., SOBRAL, 2005), and we may even think of Kant as one of the bases of some Bakhtin's proposals.

Following Kantian thought, Austrian philosopher Martin Buber posited, from a different theoretical position, the "dialogism of the word," founding what he named philosophy of dialog or relation, which sees the word as a means of relationship among human beings and the experience of intersection or interaction. From the principle of man as a being situated in the world with others, Buber (2007) says subjects do not exist individually, but only as openness to others. The "you" is a condition for the existence of the "I."

Bakhtin got in touch with Buber's thought when he was very young, keeping with it a critical interlocution (TODOROV, 1984; CLARK and HOLQUIST, 1984; EMERSON, 1997). As Buber, Bakhtin preached an irrevocable dimension of ethical responsibility of human existence and a valuing of the act of responding. For Buber:

> We respond to the moment, but we respond at the same time for it, we become responsible for it. A worldly concrete reality, recreated, was placed in our arms: we respond for it. (…) a crowd of men moves around you, and you respond for their unhappiness (2007, p.50).

So, Bakhtin and his peers, in the 1920's, already argued for "ethical acts" as participative acts – non-indifferent, solidary, responsible and responsive – of human agency in the (social and historic) concrete world. They sustained active responses by each subject in daily life involve comprehension and responsibility.

For the Russian thinker, "to live means to take an axiological stand in every moment of one's life (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.188). This ontology requires reinforcing the fact that Bakhtin's ethical philosophy is the basis of his discursive theories, as we may see not only in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (BAKHTIN, 1993), but also in many Bakhtinian works where Bakhtin and the Circle write about subjects' statute.

This implies that without the proper recognition of, and commitment to, the Russian philosopher philosophical principles, one can only propose and/or "apply" a "ready-made" dialogical theory, i.e., a formulaic technique for analysis, something that goes against Bakhtin's thought. There is now loose and generalized uses of dialogue, dialogy, and dialogism in language and identity studies, even by non dialogical approaches, chiefly Social Interactionist or strictly textual theories, all trying to legitimate their proposals by claiming to follow Bakhtin's perspective at the same time they try to attenuate its repercussions by remaining at a more textual than discursive level.

This is not to say the mentioned perspectives are not legitimate, but rather that we are allowed to ask them, following Bakhtin, an ultimate commitment with their foundations instead of taking refuge in the superficial aspects of a proposal whose philosophical foundations they do not want to accept. Thus, a dialogue is legitimate which recognize the implications of involved theories and pursue some kind of agreement even maintaining their differences.

1. Subject and Identity: exploring a treacherous territory

For the Bakhtinian theory, where do subjects constitute their identities? They do it in the world. They are themselves events *in* the world, inscriptions of being and sense in the world. But which world is this? It is a world that is concrete-transfigured. A concrete world because it is a world that is (phenomenologically) "out there," before us and around us. But it is also a transfigured world, an interpreted world, a symbolically (in Cassirer's sense) represented world, an evaluated, valued world. It is a world b which is never perceived without being transformed by the social- personal processes of *objectivation* and *appropriation* (in the dialectical materialistic sense).

Objectivation is, beyond a reflection, a refracted representation of the world involving social interpretation , and it depends on the way each society, and even each

social group therein, is able to see and "say" the world. Objectivation, which has a more social character, is further modified by appropriation, which depends on it, but also alters it.

Appropriation is the process by which individual subjects represent to themselves, in a personal, but not completely subjective way, the world already altered by objectivation. Social representations are a result of the forms and types of social relationships among subjects, and these are both social and personal. Thus, appropriation is a personal way of being social and objectivation is a social way of being personal.

Objectivation affects appropriation because subjects find a world already transfigured, but it is also affected by appropriation, for it stems from the several appropriations by different subjects. If subjects change *in* society, they also change *society*, for this latter do not preexists their relationships, and these are, as we have seen, mutable and mutant.

Bakhtin does not accept total isolation as our condition, but he certainly proposes a kind of constitutive isolation, that is, subjects must be individuals in the sense of I-for-myself. But they are also relational; they must be I-for-the-other. Bakhtin proposes that the battle of identity, an eternal battle, happens between these extremes, I-for-myself and I-for-the-other. Dialoguing with Ricoeur (1992), we may say that it is a relationship between *ipse* (the changing aspects) and the *idem* (the relatively constant aspects), and also between the I and the other, that is, a double dialogical arena.

This is a difficult task, but it rewards subjects because, by proposing, beyond categories of being, categories of becoming, contextually bound, this recognizes that there are always new opportunities for subjects to complete themselves from the contact with new other subjects and the same subjects in other contexts. We are always becoming the beings we are! If, before talking, or acting, subjects are already altered by others, both prospectively and retrospectively, there could not be a level of consciousness that is completely subjective. But individuality (which is never for Bakhtin strictly psychological) is nevertheless, as regards subjects, one of the bases of identity. We are all subjects, but we are not always the same subjects, due to the dynamic process of identifying which constitutes our existence in the world.

The other basis of identity is obviously the relationship among subjects, from birth to death. When Bakhtin suggests, and he does it in many places and many ways, that intersubjectivity is the house of subjectivity, he refers to our being dialogical by

nature: we become subjects in contact with other subjects. Our first contact with our self seems to us to be a contact with the other: when subjects recognize an image in the mirror for the first time, they do not know it is their own image! Only later will they perceive it to be a mirror image. Identity is then something we create for ourselves from the fragments of ourselves given by others, by the mirrors others are for us.

All subjects come to be, or, better, are always becoming subjects, on the basis of their relationships with other subjects. But each one does it in an individualized way. For Bakhtin, being implies the ability for changing, but each subject does it his way: we are always changing according to the relationships we enter into. We gain in subjectivity by engaging in ever more relationships with ever new others.

We gain because every relationship brings us new fragments about ourselves, and we use them to be more what we are, or better, what we are able to become. The others help us to be more the beings we can become, to be ever more complete, but never with a fixed teleology: we are always completing ourselves.

So, subjects are a constant becoming, not a fixed being, even as there are some constant aspects. We are subjects only because we are always becoming subjects – and the subjects each of us is – and each subject is singular, non-repeatable, although always fragmented. We are unfinished and unfinishable. Thus, there is no identity as a fixed thing, but only individual ways of identifying. Every subject is a subject in his own way. And this changes according to the different others one relates to: the self is the other's other!

We exist in the world and in a certain time, and our life is shared by many others. As Santos (1996, p.136) emphasizes, "the first modern name of identity is subjectivity". This latter is the foundation of our perception of being human. It is the basis of our sympathy for some and our rejection of others; it is the root of identities. I, a human that says "I," rely on a culture and find a place for myself in a culture which made me a being, but has also been influenced by me. In other words, human beings only come to be by being a part of a community, but we emphasize that there could be no community without relationships among subjects.

On the other hand, identities only exist when subjects propose themselves as such, by means of language, and construct the world in terms of sense, and it is the point where the concepts of subjectivity and identity intersect. Thus, we affirm that live language, not the system of language, is constitutive both of identities and subjectivities.

Maybe we could say that identity is, such as genres, a relatively stable process: it has a theme (the specific version each subject gives of "being a subject"), compositional forms (the ways this version takes shape according to the context, keeping some constant elements but mobilizing them situatedly) and a style (its specific way for mobilizing theme and compositional form).

Thus, from the enunciative project which is his self-becoming an unrepeatable subject in life, with no escape from responsibility, the subject mobilizes these elements and creates an architectonic form for his own life, for his own being-in-the-world, in an ongoing process that allows him to be ever more himself while always changing.

So, we have *ipse* and *idem* in internal conflict, I and other(s) in external conflict, all this both internalized and externalized: the individual and the social meet at the point where evaluation comes in. Evaluation is the basis of the enunciative project; subjects change from their own evaluative positions, not from some essentialist "ought."

So, our being-in-the-world, or better becoming-in-the-world, is defined from the distinct situations we are part of and the distinct others we interact with. The total set of these interactions and our being therein, constitute thus identity, or better, identification: a continuous act of "altered" self-creation, a constant identifying.

In this process, as Bakhtin's philosophy of the act allows us to say, subjects mobilize the act's content (aspects common to all identifying acts), the act's process (aspects pertaining only to every unrepeatable act of identification) and their own evaluation, contextually bound, about how to integrate content and process in every identifying act for oneself and in order to be oneself even being "altered."

As we have seen, Bakhtin's philosophy centers in the idea that identity is a constant process of self-constitution by subjects, in an unavoidable contact with other subjects, in concrete situations, and not some ethereal essence already and always present. The fact that subjectivity comes from intersubjectivity, that the "not-I" is vital for subjects to define themselves is the core of Bakhtin's ethical dialogism, pointing to the impossibility of giving a definitive answer (although we always try to do this with our responsive attitude) to Absolute Being (the essential being) and to Absolute Sense (the essential sense) as such.

Thus, Being and Signifying requires a mediation by a kind of, as it were, "subject-object," a "super / suprasubject" having a specific materiality that integrates (to use Lacan's categories) symbolic, imaginary and real in an undecidable / indiscernible / unrealizable Being/Sense (ZAVALA, 1997; SOBRAL, 2003).

2 Subject, desire and sense: I-for-myself and I-for-the-other

Subjects can only actualize desires (but not the desire) and senses (but not the sense) in the specific contexts they are in, and this can only happen when they see others and themselves from their outsidedness, midway between themselves and others. Thus, Bakthin proposes as our task as subjects (in his non- Hegelian Kantian, dialectical materialistic and phenomenological ethical philosophy) to move towards the other (to be an I-for-the-other) but then come back to oneself (to be an I-for-oneself) after having seen that which only the other can show us and showing the other that which he cannot see alone (a refracting mirror).

To avoid a negative isolation and for defining themselves, subjects, with their distinct points of view ("immiscible consciences"), must establish a rapport, not necessarily for making compatible their perspectives, but to know what distinguishes them from others, something that may create or not a third point of view but always alters in some way the relating subjects.

Thus, Bakhtin does not see subjects in an absolute isolation but neither does he propose a complete merge, a depersonalization in an all-including whole; what he does propose is that subjects live in a certain constitutive isolation, i.e. as irreplaceable individuals (I-for-oneself), but are also necessarily relational (I-for-the-other) and create the provisional totality of their identities assimilating the details about them that other subjects (each one in their own way) makes them see.

This constitutive isolation is positive because from the interest others have for our acts comes the stuff with which we create the image of our movable, and provisional totality, which we cannot actualize alone. This proposal is different from many other proposals about identity (or the subject) which seek to safeguard an idealistic "innocence" of poor subjugated subjects that try to use spurious alibis for escaping responsibility, or else the hubris of subjects which having an absolute control of their existence.

Bakhtin's philosophy recognizes two complementary aspects: on the one hand, our "unfinishedness" (in Russian *nezavershennost*) and the restrictions that affects us, and, on the other, our responsibility as subjects, which is unavoidable for this philosophy, because he conceives the condition for human freedom as recognizing, instead of denying, these restrictions, aware of our "unique situatedness," something

that do not prevent us from acting in our unique way in concrete situations - with no alibis.

If Ricoeur proposes the *ipse* and the *idem* for defining the identity of subjects, Bakhtin also proposes both something that marks stability and oscillation in a permanent rapport: we make our selves while being, always changed by others and changing others, but also feel something that tells us "I am the subject x, not y... n." This is linked to the idea of "signature," which all of us leave in our acts and utterances, linked to the idea of our being responsible for all we do, even unconsciously, something that does not force us to live necessarily full of guilt for what we do not know or see, but to live the responsibility for what we know, see and do.

We see then that for Bakhtin each subject is "populated" by multiple others, is in a sense fragmented both internally and externally, but nevertheless is a unique, irreplaceable being, due to "unfinishedness" and "situatedness": there is no identity as a product, but a continuous self-identification process which begins in birth and ends in death, the only moments each subject is completely alone.

We may conclude that our being is in a constant transformation, and each transformation helps us to be more what we may at every moment be, because there is no human essence, but only a nucleus of being that each subject identifies as "I," although not completely consciously. This nucleus is only identified by a subject because of the mirror contrast others offer him.

3 Subject and enunciation by Bakhtin

We may now explore the implications of this dialogical ontology, in its imbrications to identity and sense, for a dialogical theory and analysis. We must point out once again the fact that Bakhtinian dialogical ontology is based on a bold reinterpretation of Kantian and Neo-Kantian philosophy and dialectical materialism (cf. SOBRAL, 2005, 2009, 2010).

The main interest of the Bakhtin, Medvedev, Vološinov Circle in the field of the human sciences is language in use in interactions, which are social events. The Circle perceived enunciation – the moment language is used – as a process involving not only the physical presence of participants, but also historical time, social space of interactions, and ways of subjects being-in-the-world. For doing this, the Bakhtinian

enunciative conception focus on discourse, that is, it considers "language in its concrete and living totality" (BAKHTIN, 1984a, p.25), supposing thus that subjects address utterances to other subjects and mutually constituting themselves in a situation which, if stems from their interactions, is not completely constituted by them.

Following the Russian thinker, Sobral explains:

> The subject's agency is a knowing in several planes which integrates *process* (acting in the world), *product* (theorizing), and e*valuating* (esthetics) in terms of his unalienable responsibility as a human subject, its lack of escape, his inevitable condition of being thrown into the world and yet having to account for his actions therein (2005, p.118).

Enunciation has a dialogical structure of relationship between I and you/other. The external world comes to me through the other's word. Every utterance is only a link in an infinite chain of utterances, a meeting point of opinions and outlooks. The Circle sees *dialogue* as a general principle of language, of collective and solidary communion but with no passivity. The great contribution of the group for discourse studies is rescuing the subject and his social context by means of an interactive dialogism bringing history with them. This way, the Bakhtinian subject constitutes himself as a social, historical and ideological one.

According to Faraco (2006), the theme of the dialog, for the Circle, means a broad universal symposium which defines human existence and should be seen in terms of dialogical relationships, i.e., tensed semantic relations, involving axiological values between various meanings of utterances in contact. The dialogical relationship is always polemic, there is no passivity. Every comprehension is an active and dialogic process, therefore tense, which has in its core a response, since it involves human beings.

From involvement with others being constitutes itself as human. Thus, the dialogical principle founds otherness and establishes intersubjectivity as preceding subjectivity, since "thought about the human sciences originates as thought about others' thoughts" (BAKHTIN, 1986b, p.103). Acknowledging dialogy is facing difference, since it is the other's word that brings the external world to us.

All words are *double faced*, that is, come from someone and is addressed to someone. Thus, having enunciation as the mark of a process of interaction among human beings, the Circle established the dialogical principle for studying its object.

Due to being a social everyday experience that implies the relationship between human beings, language must be seen as a reality defining the very human condition (VOLOŠINOV, 1986). If from the statute of the subject we see the specificity of enunciation as defined by Bakhtin, in language use we see how this statute comes to be, since living is a constant dialog and dialog occurs preponderantly by means of oral language.

Intersubjective relationships, for Bakhtin, must be studied by using a set of notions, themes (architectonics) related to the word as a dialectical and ideological sign – to the dialogical principle – as well as to everyday discourses, and following Ponzio (2008, p.201), to the "humanism of alterity". From this we may reflect on the foundations of the idea of subjectivity as making sense from dialogical intersubjectivity.

Language is a fabric constituted by a set of ideological elements which stems from the relationship of words/utterances with reality, with their author and other precedent words. Value judgments, related to responsibility/responsiveness, come from this, for language, when expressing plural experiences, reflects and at the same time refracts reality, since "The word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence" (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.13), and is thus an ideological phenomenon which may "distort that reality or be true to it, or may perceive it from a special point of view" (VOLOŠINOV , 1986, p.10).

In the Circle's thought, intersubjectivity as being prior to subjectivity, for it is the thought of other which institutes subjectivity. In this sense, the dialogical principle constructs otherness as a constitutive part of human beings and their discourses.

Our speech, or better, our utterances are,

> (…) filled with others' words (...) These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, re-work, and re-accentuate. (…) But any utterance, when it is studied in greater depth (…) reveals to us many half-concealed or completely concealed words of others with varying degrees of foreigness (BAKHTIN, 1986a, p.89/93)

The influence of otherness in the subjects' "sameness" is a constant one: "I live in a world of others' words" (BAKHTIN, 1986c, p.143) Identity, which also comes to be by means of enunciation acts, is then a movement towards others, a recognizance of a self by other selves and a recognizance of the others by the subject that addresses them.

Final Remarks

We have seen that for Bakhtin, there is no identity as a product, but a continuous process of self-identification each subject actualizes, among other subjects, from birth to death, when subjects cease to be, but not the refracted echoes of their existence. The acts we actualize, on the basis of social evaluations, are acts implying a commitment to the social group we pertain to.

Sense comes from this movement of saying oneself to other in the presumed terms of the other, as a "translation" of oneself and the other according to a ground shared with the other by means of a dynamics between evaluative intonation and active responsiveness – one of the most remarkable aspects of Bakhtin's proposal, something that makes it different from every other theories of enunciation, giving its specificity.

The comprehensive, responsive, and ethical character of human existence calls on people to assume responsibilities. In this sense, human beings have no escape: "we have no alibi in existence" (Bakhtin, apud HOLQUIST, 1990). When producing discourse, we are intermediaries/mediators who dialog and polemicize with other discourses circulating in society. Dialogical relationship is always polemical , for it does not entail passivity of any kind. All comprehension is a dialogical and active process, and for that reason marked by tension, bringing in its core a reply. Human beings and human language always suppose addressees and their responsible responses, even in spite of themselves.

Sense, created by enunciation, comes to life due to this unfinished task, and we may say that saying is saying oneself, is a saying pertaining to a certain subject actualized in the presence of other subjects; that enunciating is the process by means of which a subject, when he says, says he is a being, and says also the being of the other. Thus, sense for the dialogical conception of language depends on the ontological statute, which is social and historical, of interacting subjects. So, the implications of the concept of dialogism go beyond the scope of discourse and that of some philosophical proposals, having as its center the ethical responsibility of subjects, which have no alibi. This way, intersubjectivity in language as the foundation of the subjects' being-in-the-world also implies the commitment and responsibility of researchers to express a position favorable and pertinent to the historical, social and cultural moment they live in.

Following Santos (2004, p.71), we may say the humanistic conception of the social sciences considers the person as author and subject in the world, placing nature at the center of human beings. In addition, Bakhtinian thinking, beyond theoretical aspects, influences our option for modern humanism, centered in the culture of dialog and everyday experiences, for we believe in the engagement and commitment of human beings with their time and place, with responsibility and responsiveness, with no alibis. It is this commitment which requires us to know the philosophical foundations of the Bakhtinian proposals of dialogism, as well as to recognize its implications not only for the dialogical discourse analysis but also for the ethical and esthetical attitude required from researchers, and even from all human beings – in these times which may be called the "era of recognition" of otherness.

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