REGULAR ARTICLE

The Method of Dialogue: Transaction Through Interaction

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Abstract The text aims to give a contribution to the discussion raised by Grossen on two relevant issues: the way the dialogical construction of meaning overlaps with the interactional format of the human experience and the degree of congruence between the theoretical asset of dialogism and the whole of techniques which could be adopted within human sciences. Till now dialogism appears to be more a seductive theoretical perspective rather than a convincing methodological apparel. Diatextualism may be viewed as the conceptual and procedural framework able to fruitfully posit psychology into the realm of the "dialogical sciences", because it is focussed on the "dialogical rationality" coming out from the relationship between transaction of meanings and interaction of actors.

Keywords Dialogism · Contract of communication · Qualitative methods · Social rhetorics · Diatextualism

The adoption of complexity as a frame of reference for human science research mostly calls on cultural psychology. Dialogue may be viewed as the most powerful way to put both "culture in mind" (Shore 1996) and "text into action" (Ricoeur 1986). The properly human world is a genuinely dialogical "pluriverse" where people are interested to continuously transgress the limits of efficiency in their mutual comprehension. The dialogical stance has both very relevant ontological and epistemological implications for human sciences since it allows carrying out the "linguistic turn" which marks the emergence of firstly a postmodern sensitivity and then of a postmodern awareness (Rorty 1991).

However, the importance of "language" in the definition of the "Mind-Reality" relationship is further specified by making reference to the notions of "discursive practice" and of "context" (Potter 1996), which support the human "acts of meaning" (Bruner 1990). The pragmatic value of the dialogical stance accounts for

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the modalities through which people co-construct an agreement on their worlds of reference by engaging into "discourses" within specific "contexts". Really the "linguistic turn" produces its progressive effects when it is meant as a "discursive and contextual turn". Human agency (Arendt 1978) develops a potential of liberty and responsibility according to an "order of discourse" (Foucault 1971) which is legitimized only by specific historical and cultural contexts.

In this direction moves the study by Grossen which drives our attention on two relevant issues. First of all it explores the overlapping between the dialogical construction of meaning and the interactional format of the human experience of the world. Secondly, it questions itself on the degree of congruence between the theoretical asset of dialogism and the whole of techniques which could be adopted within human sciences.

Grossen highlights one of the most relevant issue in psychology when she attempts at translating the principles of a dialogic theory of the human mind and behavior into concrete procedures of dialogical analysis. As a consequence, dialogism appears to be more a seductive conceptual perspective rather than a convincing methodological apparel. Such claim is based on the right assumption about the necessity of congruence between the conceptual framework and the operative tools activated in the comprehension of human phenomena. Actually, if we would like to fruitfully posit psychology into the realm of the "dialogical sciences" (Bakhtin 1990), we should be able to exhibit a "dialogical rationality" (Willmott 1994) in the whole interpretative asset of human condition.

The aim of the present text is to give a contribution to the discussion of the issues raised by Grossen.

Dialogue is Not Only Interaction

People differentiate "new media" of communication from the "old" ones essentially for their being recognized as more interactive. Really, such feature would be attributed mostly to human beings (people, organizations, institutions) rather than to "instruments" or rather it would be better distributed between them. Indeed, subjectivities interact through the artifacts they have at their disposal in their chronotope. Such evidence allows us to think about the theoretical relevance of the "analysis of the interaction", mostly for psychology.

The construct of "interaction" has a high psychological pertinence, since the giants (as Piaget, Vygotsky, Mead, Lewin and some others) have differently emphasized how the understanding of human agency cannot be limited to itself, rather it needs a relationship with the Other: the context, the field, the artifacts, the world, the social order. The most evident context where the necessity to root activity into interactivity becomes pertinent is the management of the sense-making and sense-giving processes, which could be considered central for the psychological analysis. The meanings do not have a monological consistence, rather they are dialogical, since they need the conjoint (and hopefully coordinated) action of several enunciative claims (Ponzio 1990).

The prefix 'inter' reveals the way we can overcome the root metaphor of the psychological comprehension both at a popular and scientific level, by keeping it safe.

Such a metaphor is the distinction "inside/outside", which is linked to a mentalization of the space. Meaning is neither "inside" rather than "outside": it is "between". Nonetheless, what is "inter" presupposes the existence of identities which are already constructed (Mininni 2001). The co-production and the management of meanings are processes which do design the interaction according to a model of transaction.

The construct of "transaction" has received a great psychological relevance in the theory developed by Berne (1961), who has also founded a modality of therapeutic praxis, known as "transactional analysis". Though, its most relevant feature is to be found into the ordinary context, where the word 'transaction' refers to economic activity (exchange of values). When the dialogicity of sense-making is linked not only to the format of interaction, rather also to the scenario of transaction, it is possible to account for the other dynamics activated by what people do while cooperating in the world. The economic sphere evoked by transaction highlights the extreme relevance that the sense-making and sense-giving processes have for the "form of life" owed by human beings. To attempt to organize meanings means not only to orient what happens in the experience of the world, but also to collect artifacts useful to overcome the precariousness of human condition (Ghiglione 1986).

Meant as transaction, the dialogical management of meanings engages people in controlling the possibility to establish "contracts" between them, that is to agree about a minimal framework of "norms" and "correspondences". An example of tacit agreement on the ongoing transaction "through the text" is given by the "Given-New-Contract" (Clark and Clark 1977) which is active in the structure of each sentence. According to a series of indices (oversegmental, syntactic, rhetorical), both interlocutors, one at a time, agree on what could be meant as a "well-known information" and what could be meant as a "novel information". Even the famous conversational maxims, which give concreteness to the principle of cooperation by Grice (1975), might be considered as procedures aimed at translating the logic of conversation and of dialogue in terms of inner models of transaction, since they lead the interpretation toward the continuous exchange between explicit expression and implicit intention.

The transactional texture of dialogicity engages the interlocutors in controlling if and to which extent the specific coordinates of the contextual situation are binding or allow for a violation of the normative expectations of the systems of sign in use. The enunciation is a transactive interaction since the intentions are "negotiated" according to the law of demand and offer of meaning governing the needs of human beings in the double articulation of their social condition: "being together" (*mitsamt sein*) and "being the one with the other" (*miteinander-sein*) (Gadamer 1993). The landscapes of interaction revitalize the possibility to develop trans-actions, by establishing the norms of the "social contract" which could be taken for granted and the ones which should be reformulated as long as the sense-making and sense-giving activities are (re)produced. The appeal to "transaction" reminds us that:

> "dialogue is passive witness to the impossibility of escape from the other; it is passive witness to the fact that the other cannot be eluded, to the condition of involvement with the other apart from the initiative taken by the subject who is called to answer *to* the other and *for* the other. The 'I' is constitutionally;

structurally dialogic in the sense that it testifies to the relation with otherness, whether the otherness of others or the otherness of self" (Ponzio 2006: 11).

'Interaction" and 'transaction" are the two faces of dialogism as horizon of the human construction of meaning. The latter are the recto and the verso of a single paper or of a single coin although they display different writings. Indeed, while 'interaction" belongs to the realm of "possibility" and, then, it organizes the traces of options and of liberty, "transaction" belongs to the realm of "necessity", therefore it organizes the traces of the bonds and moral responsibilities.

For a Diatextual Analysis

The "difficulty of transforming a dialogical stance into analytical tools" might be overcome by moving from two assumptions which are compatible with the theoretical and methodological framework of the idiographic science (Salvatore and Valsiner 2008). First of all, it might be useful to recognize that the subjectivity of the analyst is not a source of derangement in the interpretation of the data supporting scientific knowledge. Moreover, the voice of the analysts—his specific interests, its unique style, the singular resonance of the two questions of meanings— is a worthy dialogic resource. The claim to erase the analyst's subjective contribution is the implicit refusal of the dialogic matrix which constitutes each identity. An analyst who projects his interpretative schemes on the data: this does not play a negative influence on the validity of the results if the awareness of not being able to "neutralize" one's self is linked with behaviors about procedural correctness, but also about critical prudence and humble openness.

Secondly, it is better to recognize that the absence of standard criteria and of formal procedures is not a deficit which might damages the generalization of results, but it is a source of enriched senses. As the literary, artistic and/or musical critique might be accounted as "science" (in an unrestricted sense), even if it does not foresee a preventive agreement on the modalities through which people relate to aesthetic masterpieces, then the analysis of the enunciative interactions and transactions of sense might keep its validity, because, though it cannot be realized as "monologizing practices", it keeps the mobility and the variability of dialogue. While analyzing enunciations, it is not possible to avoid the practice of listening. Therefore it is quite unavoidable the identification with a phonological practice, which is defined by specific idiosyncrasies. Nonetheless, such inerasable limit of human condition is mitigated by the enhancement of the multiplicity of canons, by the flexibility of options and by the versatility of procedures.

First of all, it is useful to point out an implicit level of dialogical methodology, connected with the good practice, widely diffused, as to run the research in groups. Consequently, even the reports of the research are mostly multi-vocal, since there are many authors. It is appropriate to assume that the plural texts coming from the scientific literature do have moments rich in dialogue, where different positions, hypothesis, suggestions are confronted with each other. The responsibility of the interpretation of the results of the research on particular/specific formats of interaction is distributed "between" the numerous subjectivities which have interest

in anticipating on the "inside" a dialogue between the objections manifested from the "outside", in the wider communities of researchers. The "non constrictive agreement" already reached in the phase of the research accounting is an acceptable level (and maybe the only possible one) of "objectivity" where (human) sciences may address themselves.

Another contribution of implicit intersubjectivity is to be found in the production of the text-in-interaction, object of research. This production comes from the co-interiorization of the dynamics activated from the context that the enunciator of a text cannot avoid to develop. Actually, a "happy" communication postulates a (background) agreement on the modalities through which the situation of enunciation is defined.

In my practice of critical discourse analysis inspired by psycho-semiotics I have elaborated some interpretative procedures I have labeled "diatextual approach" (Mininni 1992, 2008). Such approach aims at answering to the second issue raised by Grossen; that is the difficulty in translating the dialogical theory into a methodological concrete apparatus.

The notion of diatext is a tool suited to capture the following idealized dialogue: "Are you a subject?"—"Yes, because you are my enunciative context". This imaginary dialogue is an *a priori* condition of discourse and, therefore, in any text we find certain markers recalling its original, generative core; such markers can be included under the following summarizing, idealized enunciation: "In this situation, I have to say that...". Shortly, "diatext" is a semiotic device to understand the context as it is perceived by the enunciators of the text, as they imagine it and show that they take it into account.

The diatextual researcher starts from the assumption that the meaning of a discourse could be caught by answering to three basic questions: Who is saying it? Why does s/he say it? How does s/he says it? These questions have an ethno-methodological valence since first of all they guide the practices of comprehension of those who participate to the communicative event. To take part into a conversation (and/or to come into a dialogical relationship) means to grant such an enunciative contribution of sense, as to show who is speaking, what could legitimize what s/he is saying and which is its claim of validity. These questions do organize the interpretative procedures of a diatextual researcher, since they can also guide him/her to focus on a series of markers which allow to point out the *Subjectivity*, the *Argumentation* and the *Modality* of discourses and thus to catch the meaning within the dynamic of reciprocal co-construction of text and context of enunciation.

The first question (*who says what?*) aims at clarifying the way the text speaks of its subjects, by weaving the complex link with the image the enunciator elaborates of him/her self and of the addressee. The traits of *subjectivity* which could be revealed through a diatextual analysis are:

a) *Agentivity markers*: what shows if the enunciator is source or goal of action;
b) *Affectivity markers*: what highlights the emotional dimension of texts;
c) *Embrayage/debrayage markers*: what reveals whether the enunciator is involved or not.

The diatextual researcher looks for traces of the dialogue between the enunciative positions that (through the text) let the identity profile of the ideal author and of the

ideal addressee come out. As in the famous pictures by Escher, where the flowers become progressively birds, the meanings that constitute a text let the figures of their enunciators coming out.

The second question (*Why does s/he say that?*) points out an axis of semiotic pertinence which allows the discourse to "articulates arguments", that is to organize "meanings why", to give voice to reasons and aims why one says what says. The traits of *argumentation* which could be investigated through the diatextual analysis are:

a) *The "stake" markers*: aims and interests animating the text;
b) *Narrative markers*: scenes, characters, models of action;
c) The network of *logoi* and *antilogoi* activated within the several narrative and argumentative programmes.

The third question (*how s/he says that?*) focuses on the articulation of the "*dictum*" and of the "*modus*" of discourse according to which the meaning is shaped, that is acquires a *Gestalt* quality which could be evaluated as "good" or "bad", "nice" or "naughty", "effective" or "insipid" etc. The traits of modality which could be investigated through diatextual analysis are:

a) *Meta-discursive markers*: expressions of comment and reformulation;
b) *Discourse genre markers*: reference to the typology of text and intertextual references;
c) *Opacity Markers*: rhetorical figures, frame metaphors, etc.

Diatextual analysis is a proposal for a "subjective" interpretation, with the explicit awareness of the particular and the fallible nature of its results. The analysed text links the subjectivity of the researcher to the subjectivity of enunciators . The researcher expresses his/her subjectivity first into a series of options which are previous to the data analysis, starting form the definition of the "topic", object of analysis, up to the selection and the collection of the *corpus* and to the focalization of the pre-theoretical point of view (or ideological orientation) to enter the text.

Subjectivity in the methodological practice of the diatextual researcher is also congruent with the aim of investigating the presence of other "subjective" voices within the corpus, that is the identity positionings that the text realizes for the interlocutors it meets. The text is like a mirror, since it shows who the enunciators are and how they act in it.

Conclusion

Dialogue is a specific communication contract "intralocutors" have to draw up in order to turn into "interlocutors". When people dialogue, they both "interact" through the mutually active dynamics specifying discourse as sense making, and "negotiate" the sphere of needs, of interests and of yearnings after reciprocal satisfaction. This double bound may be translated into the guiding principles for the diatextual researcher, namely *dialogism*, *situationism* and *olism*. All of them enhance the complex nature of "language-in-action", namely dialogue. Though apparently evanescent, intangible, slippery, confused and impressionistic, the "oversummative

effects" of a particular discursive practice are the most interesting ones for the diatextual approach, because communicative events shape their sense "through" their being "texts-in-contexts".

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