

## **About the Bakhtinian Thought: A Reception of Receptions / *Sobre o pensamento bakhtiniano: uma recepção de recepções***

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### **ABSTRACT**

There are several receptions of the Bakhtinian work: those which situate it in a cultural and historical perspective, making it possible to understand the context inherent to it, the interchanges with which it was instituted and its development paths; those which separately take one or other of its ideas, and those which search to infer a less or more systemized framework from it in order to consider a specific object. When we concentrate on those last ones and on the field of studies about language, we examine the receptions of the Bakhtinian thought as a pragmatics, a sociolinguistics, a semiotics, a social theory, a theory of the discourse. The perspective of this branch of instruction is the one on which we lastly focus in order to reflect upon some of its fundamental basis.

**KEYWORDS:** Dialogism; Dialogical Language; Discourse; Utterance

### **RESUMO**

*São diversas as recepções da obra bakhtiniana: as que a situam em perspectiva histórica e cultural, dando a conhecer o contexto inerente a ela, as interlocuções com as quais se edificou e os caminhos de seu desenvolvimento; as que adotam, isoladamente, um ou outro de seus conceitos e as que buscam dela depreender um arcabouço, menos ou mais sistematizado, para a reflexão de um objeto em particular. Fixando-nos nestas últimas e no domínio dos estudos sobre a linguagem, examinamos as recepções do pensamento bakhtiniano como uma pragmática, uma sociolinguística, uma semiótica, uma teoria social, uma teoria do discurso. Na perspectiva desta disciplina, é que nos centramos, por último, para refletir sobre algumas de suas bases fundamentais.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Dialogismo; Linguagem dialógica; Discurso; Enunciado*

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*In order to talk about prose, I can confess only one master, whom I read tardily and who taught me everything I know about prose and novel, in the academic perspective and beyond that.*  
Cristovão Tezza

What are M. Bakhtin's contributions? There are several answers to that question and they arise from different fields of knowledge. The epigraph highlights an extract from Cristovão Tezza's "literary autobiography," which, with the unquestionable power of this kind of testimony, declares his "essential reference – Mikhail Mikháilovitch Bakhtin" (TEZZA, 2012, p.2). The answers deriving from researches arise from the academy, and they are, by definition, prone to debates. In that context, the philosophical and/or theoretical contribution of the Bakhtinian thought is distinguished. Several available researches are dedicated to situate it in a cultural and historical perspective, making it possible to understand the context that is inherent to it, the interchanges with which it was instituted, and its development paths. It is the case of C. Brandist's works (especially in 2002) which bring results of an extensive research in fundamental sources and produce a cultural and intellectual history of the period related to Bakhtin's activities. When establishing a group of relations with the sources and the interchanges of the works from the Circle, Craig Brandist renders questionable his whole originality and, when he is examining the differences among the contributions, mainly from Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Medveded, and even the differences among the works from different periods of Bakhtin himself, he also renders his unity questionable.

The Bakhtinian contributions are further shown in another way: spread in different branches of instruction that end up by separately taking one or other of their ideas, such as the concepts of genre, carnivalization, dialogue, polyphony, among others. Herein, for instance, the ideas of represented heterogeneity and constitutive heterogeneity are written, and those are expressed by Jacqueline Authier-Revuz (1990), based on the Bakhtinian work, and they also migrated from linguistics to discourse analysis. "Dialogism" even has an entry in the *Dictionary of Discourse Analysis* (CHARAUDEAU; MAINGUENAU, 2004), and it indicates a variety of its utilization by the studies of discourse.

Other researches, also recognizing the importance of the Bakhtinian work, but with different purposes, try to infer a less or more systemized framework from it in order to consider language, literature, culture, education, etc. The trend among those

researches is to give priority to the consideration of a common project in the Bakhtinian work. In that line, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (1990) give priority to an ethical perspective and define prosaics.

Michael Holquist's reception (2002), initially published in 1990, also seems to recognize a common project in the Bakhtinian work, based on the concept of dialogue. However, the chapters of his book separately consider "existence as dialogue," "language as dialogue," "novelness as dialogue," "authoring as dialogue." In *This heteroglossia called Bakhtin*, a chapter that is added to the second edition of his book, the author, when pointing out that Bakhtin's work object is the text, ends up by supporting his position in the Russian philology<sup>1</sup> and takes a stand in a debate about the philologist's own creation – already explored by Emerson (1997), when she examines Mikhail Gasparov, Yuri Lotman, Mikhail Girshman and Vadim Kozinov's different positionings on the philologist's dissolution before the text he studies, his relative independence, or his involvement.

Brazilian experts also infer a common project in the Bakhtinian work, from the acknowledgment of the dialogical nature of language:

the dialogical nature of language is a concept that performs a fundamental role in the entirety of Mikhail Bakhtin's works, operating as a generator center for the several aspects that make the thought of this productive theoretician singular and alive <sup>2</sup>(BRAIT, 1994, p.1).

Thus, being received in diverse ways, the Bakhtinian work is also utilized in several fields. For the Russian context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Emerson (1997), at the end of her dense consideration on *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, foresees a probable impact of the Bakhtinian thought on the fields of pedagogy, literature, and meta-humanities. The author emphasizes ongoing researches in the pedagogical field which state, for instance, the importance of the dialogue among cultures in students' education as well as in educators' professional growth. She also recognizes the increasing interest for Bakhtin's recently discovered articles on education. For the

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<sup>1</sup> In his argumentation, Holquist does not forget Bakhtin's answer to Viktor Duvakin, when he considered himself more a philosopher than a philologist: "I am a philosopher, a thinker" (Apud HOLQUIST, 2002, p.192).

<sup>2</sup> Text in original: "a natureza dialógica da linguagem é um conceito que desempenha papel fundamental no conjunto das obras de Mikhail Bakhtin, funcionando como célula geradora dos diversos aspectos que singularizam e mantêm vivo o pensamento desse produtivo teórico".

author, in the field of literature, the interchange with Bakhtin tends to be redefined – far from “endless, at times mindless applications of Bakhtinian catchwords” (EMERSON, 1997, p.277) – once his philosophical perspective is now known. Also due to that enlarged knowledge of the Bakhtinian work, in which its object is not identified only to the literary field, but to human beings and to what surrounds them, the different developments of the Bakhtinian thought for the treatment of culture are characterized by Emerson who always relates them to Russian historical circumstances.

The use of Bakhtin in the universe of reflection on culture is not clearly linked only to Russian circumstances. There are countless approaches of academics in several parts of the world in this field. Not all of them emphasize the linguistic aspect in Bakhtin, as Allon White, for example, does when he nominates “critical sociolinguistics of culture” (2003, p. 129) as the field of knowledge in which, for him, Bakhtin becomes notable.

Hirschkop (1999) and Brandist and Tihanov (2000) are important works that explore the sociopolitical aspect of the Bakhtinian work and its contributions for a social theory. Nevertheless, Brandist has considered the limits of the Bakhtinian approach because it does not hold a social theory. For the author, Bakhtin is an idealist thinker. But he mentions the *Theses on Feuerbach* in order to recognize, in the same course and in relation to a mechanical materialism, the value imbedded in an active, dynamic idealism (BRANDIST, 2012, p.9).

The perspective of Michael E. Gardiner, however, is that the Bakhtinian thought is not incompatible with dialectics; it is only incompatible in relation to the dialectics inherited from official discourses (GARDINER, 2000). Still, for the author,

what is amazing is that, despite the clearly transdisciplinary amplitude and nature of Bakhtin's work, as well as the unquestionable influence that he has had in the course of cultural debates since the last quarter of century, his impact on social sciences has been, at most, punctual and, at least, insignificant (...) I defend the idea that the relative oblivion in which it is kept is due to, at least in part, the serious challenge that a Bakhtinian dialogism causes to numerous presuppositions and to several methods that are essential for the social sciences in their customary practices (GARDINER, 2007, p.67-68)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The translation to Portuguese of this quotation and others included in the Portuguese version is the author's.

Carlos Alberto Faraco's studies on the work of the Bakhtin Circle do not restrain from examining its contributions to linguistics and its project for a metalinguistics, but they lead him to affirm that "we are before a general reflection of a philosophical nature (a definition on the Being of Language) and not a proposition of a scientific nature (definition of a method for the analysis of a 'calculable object')"<sup>4</sup> (2003, p.103).

Other academics identify and describe "the turn to science" (HIRSCHKOP, 1999, p.157-169; BRANDIST, 2002, p.13<sup>5</sup>) in Bakhtin. The turn to science includes the interchanges with psychology, sociology and linguistics, which have, for their part, answered to Bakhtinian definitions. Surely, the identification of the text as a common object for the human sciences, "the primary given," "the unmediate reality," is one of reasons why the interest of those fields for Bakhtin has been generated (BAKHTIN, 2004, p.103). For Bakhtin, unlike natural sciences, the sciences which are interested in the study of human beings and their mind, their acts, their language do not have a directly observable object, but the texts that, produced by human beings, express their thoughts, their values, their views of the world: "where there is no text, there is no object of study, and no object of thought either" (2004, p.103). The academic, also being situated in his place and time, "dialogues" with the texts, their time, their definitions, in order to understand them and understand human beings. Thus, it is the understanding of human beings by human beings – of the word by the word<sup>6</sup>. Then, the role that the text (the language, but not the linguistic system) has for Bakhtin in the understanding of the world and the other by the subjects is disclosed: "Things fraught with word" (2004, p.162).

In view of the prominence of the text, as a common object of the human sciences, it can be understood that language is central in the Bakhtinian thought. It is correct to say that this statement does not equally apply to the Bakhtinian work as a whole. What is qualified as a turn for the field of language has really been studied and situated in Bakhtin and the Circle's works. That turn has been considered under the sign of rupture (for instance, BRANDIST, 2002) or continuity (for example, FARACO,

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<sup>4</sup> Text in original: "estamos diante de uma reflexão geral de natureza filosófica (uma formulação sobre o Ser da linguagem) e não de proposições de natureza científica (formulação de um método para análise de um 'objeto calculável')".

<sup>5</sup> The two authors, however, situate it differently in the works of the Circle members.

<sup>6</sup> A relativist positioning? Later on we get back to that.

2003). For that reflection, however, it is particularly important to point out that even language centrality, once it is assumed, is also differently considered.

As we know, the interchanges between Bakhtin and linguistics are two-way. They occur in the very Bakhtinian work with its criticism to the Saussurian thought; with its open preference for the communication unity, the utterance, and not for *langue* unities, sentences, words; with the conceptualization of language as constitutively dialogical; with a proposition for metalinguistics (not linguistics). They continue receiving those formulations by linguists, being encouraged, at the same time, by contact points and specificities. The Bakhtinian work is appraised in a different, or rather, relatively different way. The focuses, the relations with other theories vary, if not only, but mainly, due to the different theoretical contexts in which it is received.

Thus, we must be attentive, with no thorough purpose<sup>7</sup>, to this reception diversity in the language study context. Geraldo T. Souza (1999) believes in the development of metalinguistics proposed by Bakhtin, whose object, the concrete utterance, is identified in a careful analysis of the Bakhtinian work.

Also considering the metalinguistics, or, as she prefers, the Bakhtinian translanguistics, Julia Kristeva (1970) points out the notion of utterance and identifies, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, a notion (although diffuse) of discourse. In a structuralist perspective, she makes Bakhtin notable as being the pioneer of a modern semiotics, of a theory of meaning, then, inexistent. Thus, she emphasizes that the Bakhtinian work allows one to understand meaning as a whole, to describe the specificities of literature, and to situate the concrete literary process in its differential place, that is, in the history of meaningful systems – historicity interpretation through the modern ways of synchrony and diachrony. At this moment, when she introduces the French publication of the Bakhtinian work about Dostoevsky, the author considers that, even without a modern theory on language – structuralism – and on the subject – Freudianism –, Bakhtin is distinguished due to his not dichotomizing form and content and utilizing a historical perspective, which is absent in the poetics of the first formalists. As we can also observe herein, it is a reading traversed by the author's investigations and the circumstances of her time.

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<sup>7</sup> And not aiming to chronologically order the reception events.

Similar to Kristeva, Tzvetan Todorov (1981; 1997) also prefers the term translinguistics, but he makes his understanding of the Bakhtinian proposal clear when he relates it to pragmatics: “the term used nowadays that would more faithfully correspond to what Bakhtin aims at would probably be *pragmatics*; and we can say, with no excessiveness, that Bakhtin is the modern founder of that branch of instruction” (1981, p.42)<sup>8</sup>.

With the epithet, the author emphasizes the language used in communication, the “dialogical principle” – that guides all of his 1981 consideration – and, in the comparison with the Jakobsonian’s formulations, he points out what he considers to be absent in them: the relation among the utterances – that he translates as intertext, based on Kristeva.

However, the developments of pragmatics and, linked to them, the analyses of dialogue that, in general, formally explore the logical relations of short linguistic sequences do not constitute a place for reflection upon the dialogue such as the Bakhtinian work points out and makes it very clear, for instance, in *Discourse in the Novel* (BAKHTIN, 1981). This assertion can also clarify Bakhtin’s warning that “the dialogic relations (...) do not in any way coincide with relations among rejoinders of real dialogue – they are much broader, more diverse, and more complex” (2004, p.124).

White (2003), to whom we have already referred, even being situated in the literature and culture field, reflects on Bakhtin’s contribution for the classic sociolinguistics. For the author, it is descriptive, but not explanatory, since there is not, according to him, a social theory present in the Bakhtinian principles about the centrifugal and centripetal forces. According to his words, the dynamic model, proposed by Bakhtin, that includes the action of social forces in opposition, saves him from the crude mirror-like relation between language and social class.

In a similar direction, Mika Lähteenmäki (2010) also investigates possible Bakhtinian contributions for the sociolinguistic study, starting from the notion of

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<sup>8</sup> Text in original: “o termo atualmente em uso que corresponderia mais fielmente ao que visa Bakhtin seria provavelmente pragmática; e podemos dizer, sem exagero, que Bakhtin é o fundador moderno dessa disciplina”. Todorov reasserts, more surely: “(...) Bakhtin is engaged in introducing the basis for a new linguistics, or, as he will call it later, ‘translinguistics’ (the term used nowadays is ‘pragmatics’), whose object is not the utterance anymore, but the enunciation, that is, the verbal interaction” [“(...) Bakhtin se empenha em lançar as bases de uma nova linguística, ou, como dirá mais tarde, ‘translinguística’ (o termo em uso hoje seria antes ‘pragmática’), cujo objeto já não é mais o enunciado, mas a enunciação, ou seja, a interação verbal”] (1997, p.15).

linguistic diversity, which is not considered as an exception, a deviation, but positively as a defining character of natural languages and linguistic communities. The author emphasizes the Bakhtinian voice and heteroglossia as being valuable instruments to analyze linguistic diversity, which includes specific, concrete, and ideologically different conceptualizations of world. Lähteenmäki, nevertheless, considers that the sociolinguistic approach also needs to be endowed with a sociological theory<sup>9</sup>, which is, for him, absent in Bakhtin's work.

Beth Brait prefers the interpretation of the Bakhtinian proposal as a “dialogical theory/analysis of discourse” (2006, p.14), and she does it through a study that covers the Bakhtinian work, aiming to point out discourse as its object and a number of relevant concepts, and reflects on the adequate methodology for the dialogical exam of discourse.

We affiliate ourselves with the studies that recognize, in the totality of the Circle's works, important contributions based on which we can form a theoretical and methodological whole in order to understand and study language. It is a theory, at least in the context of language study, in which a concept of dialogue as its founding and organizing axis is singled out. Thus, it is a dialogical theory.

For us, the dialogical concept of language has, laicly speaking, the value of an evidence, an obviousness, that surprises us; an obviousness that, nevertheless, needs to be shown, developed. Its specificity – despite its formulation being assystematic and, under several aspects, also irregular – inserts it in the history of linguistic ideas. We understand that there is a place for the Bakhtinian thought here.

In that context, for the consideration of the object of the dialogical theory, we get back to two main concepts, previously pointed out: discourse and utterance. In the glossary that he makes available in the end of his edition and translation into English of Bakhtin's texts, Holquist (1981) includes these terms. In the first entry, he adds an explanation about a choice in his translation and, in the second, a quotation in order to elucidate the term.

DISCOURSE, word [*slovo*] The Russian word *slovo* covers a bigger territory than its English equivalent, signifying both an individual word and a method of using words [cf. the Greek *logos*] that presumes

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<sup>9</sup> In Lähteenmäki (2004), the author mentions the sociological perspective of Anthony Giddens.

a type of authority. Thus the title of our final essay, “Discourse in the Novel,” might also have been rendered “The Word in the Novel.” We have opted for the broader term, because what interests Bakhtin is the sort of talk novelistic environments make possible, and also how this type of talking threatens other systems that are more closed. Bakhtin, at times, uses discourses as it is sometimes used in West – as a way to refer to the subdivisions determined by social and ideological differences within a single language (i.e., the discourse of American plumbers vs. that of American academics). But it is much more common the more diffuse way of insisting on primacy of speech, utterance, all *in praesentia* aspects of language (1981, p. 427).

UTTERANCE [*vyskazivanie*] Bakhtin’s extension of what Saussure called the *parole* aspects of language (the speech act/utterance), but where utterance is made specifically social, historical, concrete and dialogized. See the numerous and excellent discussions of this in V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, as on pp. 40-41: “In the verbal medium, in each utterance, however trivial it may be, [a] living dialectical synthesis is constantly taking place between the psyche and ideology, between the inner and outer. In each speech act, subjective experience perishes in the objective fact of the enunciated word-utterance, and the enunciated word is subjectified in the act of responsive understanding, in order to generate, sooner or later, a counterstatement” (1981, p.433-434).

In the first entry, the wider meaning of the term discourse and also the meaning that brings it closer to the notion of utterance, which is exposed in the second record, are shown. From the Circle’s work, the author infers the meaning of these concepts, but he also includes them in the Saussurian linguistic paradigm in order to contrast them to the concept of *parole*, emphasizing their social, historical, concrete, and dialogical aspect.

Holquist resorts to Saussure’s concept of *parole* in order to explain Bakhtin’s concept of utterance – even if the dichotomy element has not been prioritized by its formulator and even if there are so many considerations on this issue. Thus, he can insert this concept in the paradigm of that one, which, along with the concept of *langue*, settles the history of modern linguistics. We know that the notion of system, structure, is not disregarded by Bakhtin, but it is understood, previously, as a result – and not the opposite – of the living language or of the language in use. And that is the one which motivates and organizes the Bakhtinian proposal.

From the notions of discourse and utterance, it is possible to configure Bakhtin’s aimed object: the real manifestation of language by speakers situated in a specific context. If briefly indicated, that object can be mistakenly associated with others from

other perspectives of contemporary linguistics. This object becomes specific (and it could not be different) when it is studied in relation to a wider field of reflection and when it is contrasted with other theoretical and methodological perspectives.

The outline of the object does not get rid of its relations with the society that produces it. The entries above allow us to qualify that. The first entry considers the social and ideological aspect that the notion of discourse contains in the Bakhtinian work. It also reminds us that the focus given to the novelistic discourse characterizes it as part of a social resistance aimed at constricting other discourses and, in that case, other more closed systems.

Thus, it is not aimlessly that Bakhtin considers the novel exemplary. In the complex and tense interaction among characters and in the relation between them and the authorial voice, which is a definer of a given novelistic form, a plurality of voices, a diversity of discursive genres and different ways of other's speech transmission are manifested; at the same time, the novel itself, as the entry reminds us, acts as counter discourse in the field of the consolidated literary genres. Those are the centripetal and centrifugal forces which we have already mentioned and through which Bakhtin explains the discursive fight engaged in the society.

Bakhtin's work about the novel is also exemplary for us; if it is not to obviously find the same relation and stratification of voices in other genres, it is for us to grasp the meaning of his assertion about the social, ideological and dialogical character of discourse, of utterance. The Bakhtinian considerations are produced in a critical interchange with formalism and ideologism, and they do not reject the form. The form itself, being inseparable from content, expresses the axiological relation of the author and the speaker with the content. For Bakhtin, the polyphonic form of Dostoevsky's novel artistically expresses a fight against the human being objectification<sup>10</sup>.

The quotation introduced in the second entry makes the links established between the utterance, of a replying nature, and the subjects of the interchanges and their internal and external world explicit. Thus, it is attributed to language an important role in the constitution of consciousness, in the formation of the identities, and in the organization of worlds. Thus, the outline of the object does not separate discourse and

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<sup>10</sup> We have already mentioned it in Marchezan (2006).

utterance from their relations with the subjects that produce them: Social subjects endowed with an internal world which is dialogically built.

Thus, it is recognized that language, neither language as a system, nor language from grammar books, but the living language, from the tense and complex interactions, has an important role in the human processes of conceptualizing realities, worlds<sup>11</sup>. It is not, however, a relativist, nor an anti-realistic perspective – unless we understand realistic as the reflected correspondence between language and the world, the direct correspondence between language and society.

When reflecting about polyphony, Bakhtin considers:

We see no special need to point out that the polyphonic approach has nothing in common with relativism (or with dogmatism). But it should be noted that both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism) (1984, p.69).

Todorov (1997), in the already cited preface – without the preoccupation of systemizing the Bakhtinian thought, which moves him in the 1981 book –, uses the same quotation from another edition in order to deny relativism and bases the Bakhtinian work upon the religiosity it infers. We go back to the quotation above differently: we aim to confirm, against relativism, what was proposed by Bakhtin: the “authentic dialogue” is intrinsically social.

Based on that, with the present reflection upon different receptions of the Bakhtinian work, we do not want to qualify one of them as a true reception, but to participate in the debate, in the “authentic dialogue,” which involves so many fields of knowledge.

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<sup>11</sup> In Marchezan (2010), we refer to that issue based on Pavel Medvedev.

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