

# Approaching Communicative Language Teaching Sociolinguistic Theories Dialogically

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This paper examines key aspects of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory of language and addresses these to the two main sociolinguistic theories that are presumed to inform Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), specifically, the work of the American linguistic anthropologist, Dell Hymes, and the British systemic functional linguist, Michael Halliday. A dialogic perspective exposes critical shortcomings in the sociolinguistic theories for understanding the essential qualities of language in use. Both Hymes and Halliday fail to identify and interrogate the utterance as the essential unit of speech communication. Teachers are left with only partial insights that are difficult to implement in the classroom, and fail to move us beyond the CLT impasse, namely the continuing use/usage divide. Finally, I draw attention to the Bakhtinian distinction between words as signals and words as signs. Any time language is taught from the implicit viewpoint of language-as-system, the possibility that words will become mere signals increases. From a Bakhtinian perspective, signals will merely be recognized, not actively responded to. The implications of students

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recognizing signals as opposed to actively responding to signs need to be investigated to determine their influence on the different processes of language acquisition and learning.

### *Introduction to the Work of Mikhail Bakhtin*

The work of the Russian philosopher of language, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), has become increasingly well known in the Anglophone world since the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his long but troubled life (see preceding footnote), Bakhtin dealt with an array of topics that were of concern to many scholars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century after Einstein and Freud had overturned old ideas and certainties about time and space and the psyche.

Bakhtin’s diverse topics deal with the nature of being; the relation of the self and other; the status of knowledge; the nature of language; the relationship of the individual to society; the linguistic nature of political systems; culture; literature; ethics; and aesthetics. This vast scope has resulted in Bakhtin being taken up in many fields—literary and cultural criticism and language education to name just three.

Westerners brought up on binaries, dichotomies—an “either/ or” view of the world—can have problems holding relations together in Bakhtin’s “both... and” understanding of the world. Bakhtin’s work has a “liminal” quality because of its dialogic basis, and because, as he acknowledges, his work moves “on the borders...junctures and points of intersection” of linguistics, philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the work of Roman Jakobson, Mikhail Bakhtin was the subject of discussion in the Francophone intellectual world in the 1970s. In his homeland, Bakhtin had been rediscovered in the 1960s, and reinstated as an important intellectual figure after a prolonged period of both government-imposed and self-imposed internal exile in the Soviet Union.

and literary criticism (Bakhtin 1986, p. 103). The practical result in Western academia has been that different fields have emphasized different aspects of Bakhtin's work for their own purposes, or, because Bakhtin has become a bandwagon phenomenon, his work is quoted in terms that are sometimes virtually unrecognizable, e.g. Molle and Prior (2008).

Another problem for students of Bakhtin is the disputed authorship of some texts connected to Bakhtin but signed by Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Voloshinov. These two men were members, along with Bakhtin, of intellectual circles in Nevel, Vitebsk and then Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> In celebration of Bakhtin's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, not long after his rehabilitation in the Soviet Union, the Soviet semiotician Vyacheslav Ivanov claimed that Mikhail Bakhtin was actually the author of the major works originally attributed to Medvedev and Voloshinov, including the latter's "Marxism and the Philosophy of Language," and "Freudianism: A critical sketch," which I will draw on in this paper. Bakhtin himself never denied or confirmed Ivanov's claim, though according to Matejka and Titunik (1986, in Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973), he refused to sign an affidavit regarding the alleged authorship.<sup>3</sup>

The dispute about the authorship of these texts is still not resolved. In this paper, I will continue to follow, though somewhat reluctantly, the practice of referring to the disputed texts by using Voloshinov's name followed by Bak-

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<sup>2</sup> Pavel Medvedev was not at Nevel but became part of the circle at Vitebsk (Holquist and Clark, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin's refusal to confirm his authorship in the eyes of the law is interpreted by Matejka and Titunik as evidence that he did not write the disputed texts. However, the refusal can just as easily be interpreted as stemming from Bakhtin's playful character, his lack of regard for officialdom, and/or his life-long jealous guarding of his personal privacy from outside interference.

htin's.<sup>4</sup> I do so for the following reasons: 1) the convenience that derives from attributing the thoughts outlined here to one source; 2) the immense mutual influence between the two; 3) Bakhtin ultimately developed the dialogic theory of language held by both in a more sophisticated and sustained way.<sup>5</sup>

In language teaching, Bakhtin's influence began to gather steam in the mid to late '90s because of the field's growing interest in non-literary genres and their potential for improving language teaching and learning. Bakhtin's fluid, but relentlessly interrogated notions of language, culture and communication, and his concepts of "outsidedness" and "unfinalizability" should also prove increasingly influential as globalization speeds up further, and doubts about the assumed unity of such a thing as the English, or any other national language, continue to grow.

In his own day, Bakhtin opposed the traditional language-related disciplines of his time, stylistics, poetics and linguistics, e.g. Saussurean linguistics, Russian formalism and structuralism. He criticized these for their flawed and misleading approaches and the resulting limited and faulty insights (Morson and Emerson, 1990, p. 123). Bakhtin especially objected to the work of Saussure. Saussure's work was deemed revolutionary very soon after it was pub-

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<sup>4</sup> I am reluctant after reading Tzvetan Todorov's (1984) criticism regarding the denial of even partial authorship to men now dead, particularly in the case of Medvedev, who lost his life because of the Stalinist purges.

<sup>5</sup> Connected with the question of the authorship of the disputed texts is the question of whether or not Bakhtin was hostile to Marxism. Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson (1990), who disagree with Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark (1984) that the disputed texts were written by Bakhtin, cite the different attitude of the two men towards Marxism. They claim that "Voloshinov's ultimate purpose is to link a dialogic approach to language to a dialectical view of history, a purpose completely at odds with Bakhtin's" (1990, p. 162).

lished, but for Bakhtin it was merely the culmination of the traditional Western linguistics error of “*abstract objectivism*” (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973, p. 48, original emphasis). All that abstract objectivism does it to make the basis for understanding language only language itself, i.e. the self-contained grammar. This satisfies the mind, but as such it amounts to no more than yet another example of “fatal theoreticism” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 27), which in Bakhtin’s terms means that it abstracts the life out of language and tells us nothing about how language is actually used and experienced by an individual on a mind and body level.

Saussure’s fatal division between *langue* and *parole* and his subsequent refusal to deal with *parole* means that there is no access within a Saussurean framework to the problem of the evaluative expression of the individual consciousness, and consequently, “the problem of the verbal generation of thought and the subjective psyche” (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 58).<sup>6</sup> Saussure makes no space for “matters of linguistic taste or linguistic truth” (ibid. p. 54), either. Although Bakhtin retained the idea of a language system, and the Saussurean notion of the sign, he radically rethought them through his dialogic theory of language.

### *Bakhtin’s Dialogic Theory of Language*

What in fact, is the subject matter of the philosophy of language? Where

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<sup>6</sup> The sidelining of the individual speaker in Saussure’s theory is ironic, given that it was Saussure’s initial insight about the individual speaker looking at language from one single vantage point that led, in the first place, to his revolutionary idea about the synchronic nature of language.

are we to find it? What is its concrete material existence like? By what methods can we come to grips with its mode of existence? What is language and what is word? (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973, p. 45)

For Bakhtin, the real nature of language is to be found only in conversation—dialogue—the particular, concrete, verbal (spoken or written) interaction of real people. But dialogue is by no means the trivial thing we might understand by the word conversation. Bakhtin uses the concept of dialogue not only to grasp the nature of language, but as a central metaphor for human existence and meaning. First and foremost, this is because as a human, I apprehend the world as addressing itself to me; I feel it requires a response from me. And as a human, I respond through language.

Language and existence are dialogic—in constant, responsive, inseparable relation—because my consciousness is itself constituted (entirely or almost entirely) by language: both the language of outer, expressed speech, and language which has been internalised as inner speech. My consciousness understands physical objects of the real, outside world by turning them into ideological products, or signs. A stone, for example, is only a stone—it “wholly coincides with its particular given nature” (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973, p. 9). But once I apprehend the stone in terms, say, of an image of natural inertia, then this physical object has already been converted into an ideological product—a sign. Because a sign possesses meaning, it necessarily “reflects and refracts another reality outside itself.” Therefore, a sign can only be understood by reference to other signs: “sign bears upon sign.” My consciousness “*can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs*” (ibid. p. 11, original emphasis). My consciousness refracts existence through language, making

consciousness, language and life inseparable, dialogic. Thus, for Bakhtin: “The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human existence is the *open-ended dialogue*” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293, original emphasis).

Signs are constituted from matter such as sound, colour, graphic inscription. This makes them just as much part of objective outside reality as other physical objects. Unlike natural phenomena, however, signs are social products. They cannot be exchanged by just any two human beings, but only by similarly socialized individuals, since signs have emerged and been agreed upon by members of a community only through a long process of social intercourse. Signs are both the facts and the medium of social reality. Bakhtin insists that the pre-eminent sign is the word, because the word is an “*obligatory presence, as an accompanying phenomenon, in any conscious act*” (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973, p. 15, original emphasis).

Bakhtin insists that life is properly understood only as *event*—event that is *always* accompanied by dialogue. “To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293). Language and life are inseparable because when I participate in dialogue, I do so with my whole person: “eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit...whole body and deeds.” I invest my “*entire self* [italics added] in discourse,” and as I do so, other selves are doing the same, “and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium.”

Not only is life a dialogic event, but it is also an event in which we are never alone. Being is always an event of simultaneous *co-being* (*sobytie so-bytiya*/событие события in Russian).<sup>7</sup> The dialogue that accompanies life is

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<sup>7</sup> Holquist (2002) explains that the normal Russian word for event is *sobytie*. The root—

never monologic in the sense that it is never wholly self-contained. The interaction of my self and other selves through signs, and especially words, is part of an ideological chain that “stretches from individual consciousness to individual consciousness, *connecting them together* [italics added]” (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973, p. 11).

Bakhtin settles on the utterance as the basic unit by which we can come to grips with language’s true “mode of existence.” The utterance is something that is *actually uttered* in the event of life, by a specific, specifically socialized individual in a specific place and time. It is “*the product of the interaction between speakers* and the product of the broader context of the whole complex *social* situation in which the utterance emerges (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1976, p. 79, original emphasis); it is constituted by speakers’ “reciprocal relationship” (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973, p. 86). This is to say that because an utterance is always addressed to someone (even if that someone is myself), this essential quality of “*addressivity*” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 95, original emphasis) in part *constitutes* the utterance—produces its linguistic forms *and* its tone of voice. Furthermore, I shape what I want to say in such a way that it carries out my intentions, but I can better ensure my success by trying to predict my interlocutor’s response. This “anticipated response, in turn, exerts an active influence on my utterance” before it is *even spoken*. The utterance is dialogic by definition.

I also ensure my utterance can and will be responded to in a more basic way, by making my utterance correspond to phonological, syntactical and intonation norms. This is not the simple matter that a Saussurean understanding of

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*bytie*—is the word for being, but the prefix—*so*—means sharedness or togetherness. Holquist claims: “‘Being’ for Bakhtin...is not just an event, but an event that is shared. Being is simultaneity; it is always *co-being*” (p. 25, original emphasis).



language would have us believe, where *parole* is just pulling words down from the neutral menu of *langue*. First of all, the norms I approximate and appropriate for my utterance never correspond exactly to the norms for the very basic reason that my physiology is unique: my pronunciation, even down to my sounding of “b” will never be exactly the same as someone else’s (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973, p. 53). These norms of language are never definitive: “it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294). Instead, we get the words of our utterances from the utterances of others: the word that “exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions” (ibid.).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the norms of language-as-system are not a fact, for Bakhtin, in the same way that they are for Saussure. They are merely “posited” (Bakhtin, ibid. p. 270). What Saussure calls a system is nothing more (and nothing less) than the product of “*the verbal-ideological evolution of specific groups.*” What has been passed down to us constitutes our norms. Governments and elites codify these norms in dictionaries and grammars: these are “*the forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world*” (Bakhtin, ibid. p. 270, original emphasis). The point, as Morson and Emerson (1990) note, is to see these forces for what they are: an attempt to unify is not the same thing as a unitary language system. Saussurean linguistics reifies language; it proceeds as if language-as-system is a fact. But language actually consists of languages, plural; its real mode of existence is *heteroglossia*. That is to say that the norms of language, its centripetal forces, are always struggling with the centrifugal tendencies of language. The centrifugal forces are not organized, but reflect “unique

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<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin uses the word *slovo* (слово), which can mean “word” or “discourse” in English.

[and] specific points of view on the world” (Bakhtin, *ibid.* p. 291). To expunge these different voices from the record or remove them from consideration, as Saussure attempts to do, leaves us with just “the naked corpse” of the word. On the other hand, real language, real “ideologically saturated ‘language consciousness’” is always participating in “actual heteroglossia and multi-language-ness” (p. 274) through the utterance. Moreover, the language that an individual person has acquired is not a system but an “aggregate of possible contexts of usage for a particular linguistic form” (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973, p. 70). This aggregate is constituted almost entirely by speech genres, which are utterances that have taken a typified, but still flexible, form (Bakhtin, 1986). The “authentic environment” of the utterance is not an overarching system but: “dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272).

As just noted, when we approximate the norms, we are in fact appropriating words/discourse that are “the products of prolonged social intercourse among members of a given speech community” (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1976, p. 79). Thus, the utterance looks both forward and backwards. In shaping the utterance in the expectation of a response, it looks forward—it is not yet spoken. But because no speaker is the first person to disturb “the external silence of the universe” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 69), we know that what we are about to say has been spoken about before. In this way, the utterance looks backward—it has been “already uttered” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 279). Thus it can be said that all discourse is a kind of reported speech (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973).

For Bakhtin, as well as the difficulty already acknowledged in traditional linguistics and stylistics—the fact that no word can fully express its object—in

a dialogic perspective, there is the added complexity of others' words. For Bakhtin, it is a crucial fact that "between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276). This tension between the not yet spoken and the already spoken makes each utterance complexly creative, and always evaluative: a speaker is always taking a stand when they speak. They are taking a stand in relation to their interlocutor and in relation to everything that has ever been said about an object in the past. And what that speaker says enters "the world symposium," along with the utterances of everyone else. Furthermore, because of the already spoken about quality of words or discourse, even one specific word in an utterance can be internally dialogized (see Bakhtin, *ibid.* pp. 279 – 280). That is to say, a particular word might be uttered by a speaker as if it is in quotation marks, as if the speaker, in uttering the word, is doing so with the intention of letting the listener know that the word in question is being used precisely to point to its previous use by another speaker. As Morson and Emerson (1990, p. 138) note: there can be a "microdialogue" of one word within "the internal dialogism of the whole utterance."

Finally, one more aspect of Bakhtin's dialogic theory of language that is relevant for language teachers is his distinction between words as signs and words as signals. According to Voloshinov/Bakhtin (1973, p. 70): "Language, in the process of its practical implementation, is inseparable from its ideological or behavioural impletion." This inseparability of language from meaning and the enactment of our personal, evaluative, intentions means we do *not notice* linguistic forms, we do not notice *words* as such:

In actuality, we never say or hear *words*, we say and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. *Words are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behavior or ideology.* That is the way we understand words, and we can respond only to words that engage us behaviorally or ideologically. (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, *ibid.* p. 70, original emphases)

In fact, if we do start noticing the word, or rather, a word's linguistic form, then the word becomes a signal, not a sign. A signal is "internally fixed;" it does not represent or stand for anything outside itself, "but is simply a technical means for indicating this or that object (some definite, fixed object) or this or that action (likewise definite or fixed)" (*ibid.* p. 68). The signal is not and is never ideological, i.e. it does not possess meaning in the sense of standing for something outside of itself. If a word is merely a signal, it cannot be subject to responsive understanding, which is the only real and integral understanding. In "abnormal" cases, such as foreign language instruction (*ibid.* p. 70), where we may be urged to notice word forms and where the criterion of correctness is applied to an utterance, we need to be aware whether students are likely merely to be recognizing a signal, or responsively understanding a sign. For Voloshinov/Bakhtin, "[t] he divorce of language from its ideological impletion is one of abstract objectivism's most serious errors" (1973, p. 71). For language teachers, the signal/sign distinction and whether words are merely recognized or responsively understood have far-reaching implications for what are considered to be the distinct processes of language acquisition and language learning.

*Bakhtin's Dialogic Theory of Language Addressed to CLT's Sociolinguistic Theories of Language*

*Dell Hymes*

What are the communicative events, and their components, in a community? What are the relationships among them? What capabilities and states do they have, in general, and in particular cases? How do they work? (Hymes, 1974, p. 25)

The American linguistic anthropologist, Dell Hymes, is credited, along with British systemic functional linguist, Michael Halliday, with being a prime contributor of theory to CLT. In the questions Hymes asks above, he sets out the basis and scope of what he intends will be the new discipline of sociolinguistics.<sup>9</sup> In Hymes's proposal, ethnography of communication constitutes *both* the theoretical basis *and* the heuristic method. The basis is *not* language but "a community or network of persons," whose "use of language in contexts of situation" is to be investigated directly through empirical observation (Hymes, *ibid.* p. 3). He repeats: "It is not linguistics, but ethnography, not language, but communication, which must provide the frame of reference within which *the place* of language in culture and society will be *assessed* [italics added]" (p. 4).

Hymes's twin concerns are the communicative competence of speakers of a language—the concrete and actual "ability of persons"—and a thoroughgoing

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<sup>9</sup> For a good part of the careers of both Halliday and Hymes, sociolinguistics did not exist as an academic discipline either in the US or the UK. Hymes's proposals for a sociolinguistics based on qualitative ethnographic data met with resistance because of the American social science preference for quantitative data.

sociological description of speech situation, speech event and speech act (i.e. his ethnography of speaking, later ethnography of communication). The latter is necessary in order to understand the former, which is both constituted by, and judged against, or according to, the “determinate patterns of speech activity of a community” (Hymes, *ibid.* p. 45). We have to pull up short here to note the influence of Chomsky. When Hymes reacted against the Chomskyan revolution, which had narrowed the scope of linguistics, he did not reject Chomsky completely. Instead, Hymes took the critical decision to accept that there is, in fact, such a thing as Chomsky’s distinction between competence and performance, and he then decided to explain the latter. But, critically, he chose not to jettison the notion of linguistic competence, but to assimilate it into his communicative competence model.

Hymes’s communicative competence model is intended to explain both *linguistic* competence, i.e. knowledge of *grammar*, and *sociolinguistic*—what he calls communicative—competence, i.e. knowledge of rules of *language use*. Hymes extends this notion of knowledge to include “*ability for use*” (Hymes, 1972, p. 283, original emphasis). People’s linguistic and other behaviour tells us about their linguistic knowledge and their knowledge about what constitutes appropriate language use.

Hymes’s insistence on the interrelation of language and society sounds dialogic, a “both...and” conception of language and human life, and there are ostensibly multiple parallels between his work and Bakhtin’s. Both were dissatisfied with the partial and misleading understanding of language provided by contemporary linguistics (Saussurean linguistics, formalism and structuralism for Bakhtin; Chomskyan linguistics for Hymes). Both conceive of language as communication, not merely grammar. At the same time, because of the influ-

ence of Saussure on Bakhtin, and Saussure and Chomsky on Hymes, the notion of language-as-system is a continuous presence for both, even though both insist on the primacy of actual speech. Both identify: the constitutive role of external reality in language and the social conditioning of expression and content; the role in communicative acts of intention and emotion; the salience of reported speech; the inter-individual nature of communicative acts; the existence not just of different languages in “a multi-linguaged world” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 275), but of multiple “social languages” (or discourses) within a national language; and the influence of history and culture on communication.

In the end, though, from a Bakhtinian perspective, these similarities are only of the most superficial kind because Hymes commits the fatal error of theoreticism: he assumes that overlaying all the heterogeneity of actual speech, there lies another system—the system of culture. Thus, in his communicative competence model, Hymes retains Chomskyan linguistic competence (or knowledge of grammar) but extends it to encompass a “grammar of culture.” For Bakhtin, it is ridiculous to assume that the “problem” of the heterogeneity, the *asystematicity* of language can be resolved by subsuming it into yet another system. Language-as-system is not a fact for Bakhtin, it is only *posited*. It is not “an abstract imperative,” but merely the centripetal force that is always struggling with the centrifugal (but not organized) forces of heteroglossia—the various languages at work in language at any one time.

When Hymes says he will create a theory of language that concentrates on actual speech, he characterizes actual speech in Saussurean terms, as *parole*. For Bakhtin, *parole* is not actual speech at all; *parole* is merely the instantiation of *langue*. *Parole* is based on the mistaken assumption that speech is only a matter of assembling and accumulating words from the *system*. Once Hymes

accepts Saussurean nomenclature, he must also, then, either implicitly or inadvertently accept that *parole* is nothing more than just putting *langue* into practice. With this move he simultaneously, in Bakhtin's terms, lapses into theoreticism, where "one theory is turned into a moment in another theory" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 12); *and* he loses the chance to grasp the true nature of actual speech—the significance of the utterance. Unlike *parole*, the utterance is never a free combination of forms: it is jointly constructed by the active listener; its words are saturated with the unique tones of the moment, which means that it is always "overpopulated" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294) with others' intentions and what has already been said about the words before. Individual expression is always a struggle between what the person wants to say, the anticipated and actual response of the interlocutor/next speaker, and words' cultural and social histories.

From a dialogic perspective, no matter how comprehensively Hymes delineates the components of speech events and speech acts, the most it achieves is to make a "histological specimen" of language (Bakhtin, *ibid.* p. 259). This basis and this method for understanding language will never capture the unique nature of the utterance because no two utterances will ever share precisely the same features or components in the same combinations.

No matter how carefully and painstakingly Hymes or any other ethnographer transcribes the utterance, or how diligently he listens to his participants' interpretations of it, he can never capture its true nature by this method because a) the utterance is unique and unrepeatable; b) he will never be able to do justice to the part played by, and the experience of, the active listener, or for that matter the words' history; and c) his own perspective, that of the observer, is privileged—it has the last word.



For Bakhtin, there is never a last word—the “world symposium” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293) was there before us and it will continue without us. Even if there seems to be no response now, a response will come for sure at some later time. Thus: “Sooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behavior of the listener” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 69). Furthermore:

At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form...Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. (ibid. p. 170).

### *Michael Halliday*

There is no *a priori* reason why human language should have taken just the evolutionary path it has taken and no other; our brains could have produced a symbolic system of quite a different kind. But if we consider what language is required to do for us, there are certain functions which it must fulfil in all human cultures, regardless of differences in the physical and material environment. These are functions of a very general kind. (Halliday, 1978, p. 21)

Like Dell Hymes, Michael Halliday, in the '60s and '70s, is working in the midst of the Chomskyan revolution in linguistics, but wants his work to contribute to the new discipline of sociolinguistics. Both see their work’s potential for

improving language education in the mother tongue. Both were influenced by the Prague Linguistic Circle, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> anthropological traditions in their respective countries: Hymes by Edward Sapir in the US; Halliday by Bronislaw Malinowski in the UK. In the Communicative Language Teaching literature, both are regarded as taking a functional approach to language (see Widdowson, 2007, for important differences in how each understands and theorizes function).<sup>10</sup>

The critical difference between the two for understanding their respective sociolinguistic theories and the theories' goals is that Halliday is first and foremost a linguist, while Hymes is a linguistic anthropologist.<sup>11</sup> Hymes uses the study of language use to understand culture; language is merely one means (among several other communication codes) to an end. Halliday, on the other hand, studies language to illuminate the nature of language. This nature just happens to be functional, so Halliday is similar to Hymes, in the sense of understanding language as an instrument, a social tool (see also footnote 10). However, Halliday's ultimate goal is to specify and delimit language. He in effect goes about mapping "social structures onto the single semiotic system we call 'natural language'" (Freadman, 1994, p. 47). Halliday claims: "Language

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<sup>10</sup> Widdowson's 2007 paper presents a thoroughgoing treatment of the differences between Hymes and Halliday. However, the differences between Hymesian and Hallidayan function have been repeatedly addressed by Widdowson. In an earlier personal communication to Canale and Swain (1980, p. 38), Widdowson claims that a significant difference between Hymes and Halliday is that the former takes a correlational view of language use: "certain forms are used for certain functions because they are." Halliday, on the other hand, "looks at language and use in integrational terms—certain forms are used for certain functions because they have the potential to be so used. The use of grammar adumbrates rules of use, so to speak."

<sup>11</sup> See Duranti (2009) for an explanation of the difference between linguistic anthropology and anthropological linguistics.

has evolved in a certain way because of its function in the social *system* [italics added]” (Halliday, 1978, p. 37).

Halliday’s systemic functional system of language is a code, or grammar, more properly, a lexico-grammar, based on meaning. Meaning is based on the four types of function—Halliday calls them “metafunctions”—that Halliday maintains humans use language to express: experiential, logical, interpersonal and textual (ibid. p. 27). Importantly, Halliday also takes up Bernstein’s claim that “the semantic properties of the codes can be predicted from the elements of social structure which, in fact, *give rise to them* [italics added]” (Bernstein, 1973, cited in Halliday, ibid. p. 31).

Halliday makes a deliberate choice to take a sociological perspective, not a psychosocial perspective. He claims he looks at language from the outside and concludes: “If you are interested in inter-organism linguistics, in language as interaction, then you are inevitably led to a consideration of language in the perspective of the social system” (p. 36). Based on Bernstein’s influence, Halliday insists that, for linguists, the question must not be: “what features of language are determined by [a particular language] register?” but: “which kinds of situational factor determine which kinds of selection in the linguistic system?” (p. 32). The social context—the interrelations of the topic, the participants and the role language is playing (spoken or written)—must be investigated in order to make predictions about what language items will appear in a (spoken or written) text, i.e. its register.<sup>12</sup>

Social behaviour—what can be done—is realized in the semantic code—

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<sup>12</sup> Halliday claims that his theory of *register*, which is composed of *field* (topic), *tenor* (social relations of participants) and *mode* (spoken or written) is a superior alternative to the eight components of speech in Hymes’s ethnography of SPEAKING: form and

what can be meant—which is in turn realized in the grammar—what can be said. All of these systems—the grammatical, the semantic and the behavioural—are systems of meaning *potentials*, and there is a range of alternatives, or options, available within each system. Social behaviour—the behavioural meaning potential—is the highest level, which Halliday defines as a social semiotic. This social semiotic can be encoded in language, and other non-linguistic systems of signs, too, but Halliday is interested only in language. For Halliday, the key concept is “*realization*, language as multiple coding” (p. 39, original emphasis): *can say* is the realization of *can mean*; *can mean* is the realization of *can do*. This multiple coding means that “any text represents an actualization (of a path through the system) at each level”—the level of meaning, saying, sounding (p. 40). What Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics does, then, is derive a set of linguistic categories from options of behaviour in the social system (p. 42). Highly *abstract* and *general* linguistic categories such as clause types, forms of transitivity and forms of modification within the noun phrase, realize highly *concrete* and *specific* situations in the social structure.

Unlike Hymes, Halliday rejects the Chomskyan notion of competence as too idealized. Halliday also rejects Chomsky’s distinction between competence and performance, which he sees as an unnecessary distinction between what the speaker knows and what the speaker does. For Halliday, “the background to what[a speaker]does is what he[*sic*]could do—a potential, which is objective, not competence, which is subjective” (p. 38). Halliday claims that instead, he accepts the “messiness” of what happens in interaction and builds it into his

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content, setting, participants, ends (intent and effect), key, medium, genre and interactional norms. Halliday claims register is superior because it is a determinant, not a component of speaking (Halliday, 1978, p. 62).

theory.

Hymes, on the other hand, and as noted above, *does* make a distinction between what is grammatical and what is acceptable because he accepts Chomsky's notion of competence vs. performance. The resulting knowledge-based communicative competence model of language is, in Halliday's view, "taking the intra-organism ticket to what is actually an inter-organism destination" (p. 38).

If we compare Halliday's systemic functional linguistic perspective with Bakhtin's dialogic theory of language, we can see that, as with Hymes, the social orientation to language leads to several important parallels between the two. Both identify: the constitutive role of external reality in language; the intersubjective nature of meaning; the seeming messiness or heterogeneity of interaction; discourses as ways of conceptualizing the world; the role language plays in social change; and the polyphony of words.

The key difference is that Halliday gives *primacy* to the social, claiming that social conventions, or in his term, behaviour potentials, determine, constrain and delimit what can be said; a person can choose among options but there is a limit to the options that a situation entails. Bakhtin also notes the constraining power of situation, but he denies that "the extraverbal situation is...the external cause of an utterance—it does not operate on the utterance from the outside, as if it were a mechanical force" (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1976, p. 100). Instead, the situation enters into the utterance, and even partially constructs it, but Bakhtin emphasizes that a speaker will always be trying to *resolve* a situation, by bringing their will to bear upon it.

For the speaker in Hallidayan linguistics, there are no real difficulties of the sort Bakhtin's speaker encounters when directing a word to its object (see

section on dialogic theory above). This is because the situation supplies the lexico-grammatical options and it is merely a matter of choosing from among them. That is to say, a fairly subscribed set of behavioural options are realized through generalized linguistic categories. The influence of the interlocutor, of what has previously been said about an object, and the tones of the moment do not have much power in Hallidayan linguistics.

But what happens if speakers decide to be ironic, or what if they choose, as Canale and Swain (1980, p. 19) put it, “to violate or ignore[social] conventions”? Halliday’s system will have difficulty in such cases, again because, as noted above, Halliday has made a conscious decision to sideline the psychological aspect of language in favour of the constitutive powers of the social system. But for Bakhtin, the significance of an utterance inheres precisely in its “individual, unique and unrepeatable” qualities: “its *plan* [italics added], the purpose for which it was created” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105). The speaker always has a plan; realizing it in speech is a *struggle* between the intentions of others and one’s own intentions, since language is “overpopulated” with the intentions of others (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294). Bakhtin cannot and will not ignore or downplay “the intentional dimensions” of language (p. 289); they are “permeated with concrete value judgments.” In Halliday’s system, there is no struggle to speak of.

Let us take one of Halliday’s own examples as our example: the case of a mother controlling the behaviour of her child. In Halliday’s sociosemantic system, she can choose from a range of behavioural options, which are realized in the following linguistic options: “a simple imperative mode, a positional appeal, a personal appeal or the like” (Halliday, 1978, p. 42). There is no way, in Halliday’s socially determined system, to account fully for why a choice was made

in terms of the *qualities of the moment* that influenced the mother's decision to make an appeal as opposed to an order, for example. As Morson and Emerson (1990, p. 127) point out: "Linguists tend to recognize only abstract meaning, and so collapse contextual (or real) meaning into abstract meaning." Bakhtin, on the other hand, does make a distinction. He uses the word *znachenie* (значение) to indicate abstract or dictionary meaning, and the word *smysl* (смысл) to indicate the sense or quality of a situation.<sup>13</sup> In Bakhtin's view of language-life, purpose and understanding cannot be so easily reduced to linguistic categories. To make such a reduction is to take the soul out of language, to take the life out of it.

Halliday admits that: "we would not be able to construct a sociosemantic network for highly intellectual abstract discourse" (Halliday, 1973, cited in Canale and Swain, 1980, p. 19). The construction of a language system based on a social system will have great, perhaps insurmountable, difficulty expressing, say, the aspect of the utterance which is so vital to Bakhtin, that aspect which "pertains to honesty, truth, goodness, beauty, history" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 105). Again, this aspect is the domain of the utterance's authorship, where authorship is influenced by the specific location, situation and era in which a speaker speaks.

Halliday claims that "language is a shared meaning potential, at once both a part of experience and an intersubjective interpretation of experience" (1978, pp. 1–2). But, like Hymes (although for different reasons), Halliday fails to grasp the full import and significance of the utterance because he understands language as "a basically tristratal system" (ibid. p. 39).

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<sup>13</sup> *Smysl* is a cognate of *mysl*, which means thought.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, in Halliday's view of interaction, the utterance belongs to a speaker only in "the least interesting, purely physiological sense" (Morson and Emerson, 1990, p. 129), i.e. in terms of tristratal (semantic, syntactical and phonetic) output. The "authentic environment" of the original utterance-as-event (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272) is overlooked and downplayed. Halliday's system cannot fully account for utterances where the uttered words are in complete opposition to the utterance's tone, for example. Moreover, from the dialogic perspective, it is a mistake to assign an utterance wholly, or solely, to a speaker, as Halliday does. For Bakhtin, in real, actual, meaningful communication, "the word cannot be assigned to a single speaker...The word is a drama in which three characters participate" (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 121 – 122). The "three characters" are the speaker; the active listener whose presence shapes the utterance; and those "whose voices are heard in the word before the[speaker] comes upon it." So, yes, Halliday acknowledges the polyphony of speech: "Different melodies are kept going side by side, and each element in the sentence is like a chord which contributes something to all of them" (Halliday, 1978, p. 31). However, because Halliday's interaction studies dialogue primarily, "as a compositional form in the structuring of speech" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 279), Halliday's polyphony is more abstract and less deep, less striated, than Bakhtin's, which intensely and relentlessly interrogates "the internal dialogism of the word...the dialogism that penetrates its entire structure, all its semantic and expressive layers" (ibid. p. 279).

### *Conclusion*

In the Bakhtinian view of language, a language system is only something posited; it is not a given. It is therefore a fatal error, in Bakhtin's view, to pro-



ceed, as both Hymes and Halliday do, as if the system is a fact, when really, theory is merely producing more theory. The error is only compounded if one then accepts—despite the evidence of its obvious heterogeneity—the fact of language-as-system, and then seeks another system to subsume the asystematicity.

Hymes reaches the conclusion that the structure of language depends on both grammar and cultural structures or patternings (Hymes, 1974). While Bakhtin agrees with this view up to a point, it is crucial to point out that his understanding is based on different premises; thus he reaches his conclusions in ways that are very different from Hymes. In Bakhtin's view, there is no system, as noted here repeatedly. Therefore, the better, more authentic approach for understanding language-life is through the concept of *heteroglossia*, which focuses *simultaneously, both* on language-as-system as *posited, not given, and* on the forces that decentralize language. The “language-as-system” is nothing more and nothing less than language's centripetal *tendencies*, not the laws of a system. These centripetal tendencies allow mutual intelligibility, but at the same time, there are centrifugal tendencies, which decentralize language. These centrifugal tendencies, or discourses, should not be seen as sub-systems of some kind of whole because an individual's language is not a system but an aggregate of typified utterances (speech genres). Thus, in so far as there is such a whole, this whole is only a “growing together of numerous elements” (Morson and Emerson, 1990, p. 141).

It is also a mistake, in Bakhtinian dialogic terms, to do what Halliday does and award complete primacy to a social system and state that it is the social system that determines language. Halliday's grammar elucidates only how situations may be conventionally realized; it is a system of generalized linguistic

categories. There is no real space in this view for the conscious relations of people in the moment; the generative, creative influence of such moments; the influence of others' words about an object in the past. A Hallidayan system overly congeals language; it excessively abstracts meaning, and takes the life out of language–life.

For teachers, Hymes's communicative competence model is problematic to implement because it assimilates Chomskyan grammatical competence, which is an *intrapersonal* construct, and then attaches *interpersonal* dimensions of language use to the model. As Widdowson (1989) has noted, a model which is a mere listing of elements is not really even a model. We have yet to determine how, to what degree, or whether, linguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence are connected and how far we can rely in the CLT classroom, on the student's L1 sociolinguistic competence. Can we take it for granted in teaching L2 communicative competence? This question is still not satisfactorily resolved, but it is certainly complicated by the fact that intercultural competence is now yet another requirement for success in a globalizing world. As for the components of Hymes's speech event, these are useful for raising student and teacher awareness, but the question remains as to whether or how awareness can be translated into ability for use. (Of course, the problem of knowledge and awareness and their transfer is a major problem in all education, not just language teaching.) The fact that Hymes overlooks the significance of the utterance ultimately renders all his many useful insights only partial.

As for Halliday, his grammar is one among several that teachers can learn about, but there is no agreement about the superiority of one approach to grammar over another at present. Moreover, MATEFL/MATESOL programs have traditionally focused more on the explanation and comparison of methods

than on the close study of grammar approaches. Halliday's grammar is necessarily a generalization. As such, there is no place for what teachers know to be the critical realities and particularities of how language is experienced moment-to-moment on a mind and body level. This here-and-now, the eventness and co-being of being, is the domain of Bakhtin's utterance.

Finally, a view of language as a system of interlocking parts increases the possibility that words can become reduced to signals. Signals are not open to responsive understanding but are only recognized and soon forgotten. Thus, it is clear that teachers need to be aware of how, why and when words used in particular teaching activities may become more or less likely to be recognized as signals, as opposed to being actively responded to in real and integral understanding. It may be the case that it is not always a "bad thing" for words to become signals, but it *is* a "bad thing" if the teacher is not aware why or when this is happening. In sum, the distinction between words as signals and words as signs has significant implications regarding how and in what way various activities and elements in a lesson may be influencing the different processes of language acquisition and learning. These implications need to be investigated further.

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