

APPLYING PEIRCE

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Reading together Peirce and Bakhtin since the early 1980s. A balance

The relation between Charles S. Peirce and Mikhail M. Bakhtin has been at the centre of my attention from the early 1980s.

It is a question of reading together two authors who never had any relations between them.

On one side this approach allows for a better understanding of Bakhtin's conception of dialogue, on the other, of Peirce's conception of the relation between sign and interpretant.

Bakhtin affords a better understanding of the workings of Peircean abductive reasoning, and Peirce affords a better understanding of the sense of the Bakhtinian analysis of dialogic discourse. But beyond the contribution to reciprocal understanding, the approach to both together contributes to understanding topical concepts in the study of signs.

What unites Peirce and Bakhtin is also a relational view of the world that opens out to the whole universe. For what concerns Peirce this open vision is a question of infinite semiosis whilst in Bakhtin's case it is a question of the unbounded character of dialogue which impedes the closure of a totalizing ontology.

The collocation of the sign within the general context of semiosis with its relation to the interpretant as described by Peirce, and within the dialogic context as the only context in which the sign may flourish as such as described by Bakhtin, places otherness at the very heart of the sign's identity.

Not only Bakhtin, as we know, but also Peirce contributes to show the fundamental role of dialogism in semiotics.

At the same time, both of them contribute to eliminating the widespread and frequent mistakes concerning the concepts of *dialogue* and *dialogism*.

In this paper our confrontation of Peirce with Bakhtin and vice versa concerns exactly these misunderstood concepts.

(1) *Dialogism is not reducible to dialogue on a formal level.*

Dialogism indicates a situation of *involvement with the other*, of both active or passive involvement. This is not necessary involvement due to a choice, to initiative taken by someone who decided to get involved. Consequently, dialogism is not only present in dialogue on a formal level. Indeed, formal dialogue may only be endowed with a low degree of dialogism, while discourse that is not dialogical in formal terms, in other words, that does not take the form of a dialogue, can in fact be endowed with high degrees of dialogism.

In Bakhtin's view dialogue refers to the fact that one's own word always alludes, in spite of itself, whether it knows it or not, to the word of the other. Dialogue is not an initiative taken by the self. As clearly emerges from the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, the human person does not participate in dialogue out of respect for the other, but rather and above all, in spite of himself. According to Bakhtin, dialogue is not something we choose; on the contrary, we suffer dialogue, we are subjected to it. Dialogue is not the result of an open attitude towards the other; on the contrary, it is the impossibility of closing to the other. This clearly emerges from tragic-comical attempts at indifference. Like Dostoevsky, Bakhtin too considers dialogue as the impossibility of indifference towards the other, that is, unindifference towards the other, even in the form of ostentatious indifference, hostility, and hatred. Even when unindifference degenerates into hatred, the other continues to count more than anybody else. This is exactly what the novel conceived by Dostoevsky aims to demonstrate when he renders 'the dialogic sphere of thinking human consciousness' accessible on an artistic level (see Bakhtin's monographs on Dostoevsky, 1929 and 1963).

All texts are dialogic at different levels, according to different genres of discourse, changing from a relative dialogism to a relative monologism. In one of his final papers (1974, included in his 1979 collection), Bakhtin wrote that

The text lives only through contact with another text (context). We underline that this contact is a dialogic contact between texts (utterances) and not a mechanic contact of opposition between abstract elements [...] behind this contact there is contact between people and not between things. (1979, Eng. trans.: 375)

The specific logic of the text takes the form of dia-logic, dialectics among texts.

(2) *However, dialogue does not simply involve a relationship among texts and discourses, but also among utterances.*

(3) *Dialogic relationships are not only possible among whole (relatively whole) utterances.*

(4) *A dialogic relationship is possible also inside any signifying part of an utterance, even inside the individual word, if we hear a double voice in it (see Bachtin 1963 Eng. trans.: 184).*

Thus the dialogic relationship can permeate inside the utterance, even inside the individual word, as long as two voices collide within it dialogically [...]. (*Ibid.*)

Text, utterance and word are dialogic. But they deal with

[...] the word not in a system of language and not in a “text” excised from dialogic interaction, but precisely within the sphere of dialogic interaction itself, that is, in that sphere where discourse lives an authentic life. For the word is not a material thing but rather the eternally mobile, eternally fickle medium of dialogic interaction. The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation. In this process the word does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from the power of these concrete contexts into which it has entered. (*Ibid.*: 202)

On the other hand, dialogic relationships are also possible between language styles, social dialects, etc., insofar as they are perceived as evaluative positions, as linguistic expressions of different worldviews.

Dialogism in the utterance as a whole, or in its separate parts or in its individual words is also the effect of reserve, of a certain distance established by the author. Moreover, the forms of this dialogic relationship between the author and his/her own utterance, – irony, parody, detachment, critique – depend on the relationship with the author and his/her present or absent, imaginary or real interlocutors.

(5) *But dialogism is not only present in external discourse but also in internal discourse.*

It is symptomatic that Peirce did not often directly examine the so-called ‘problem of the other person,’ that is, the problem concerning both the possibility of experiencing other selves separate from the self who actually poses the problem, and the possibility of

interpersonal communication. This is because Peirce continually dealt with this problem implicitly in his conception of the dialogic character of thought, and he found a solution in characterizing this process in terms of alterity. When Peirce did directly examine the ‘problem of the other person,’ it was to affirm that there is absolutely no ontological or metaphysical bias in favour of thoughts or feelings that the self calls ‘mine’. Further, he claimed that the experience of the other self does not present a more complex problem than the one related to the fact that specific interpretant and interpreted signs are recognized as ‘mine’; those through which the ‘I’ becomes aware of myself. Interpretant signs permitting self-consciousness are related to the signs that they interpret on the basis of the *logic of alterity*, on the basis of *dia-logic*.

In both Peirce and Bakhtin the dialogic and dialectic structure of the sign (a dialectic which, by contrast with monologic pseudo-dialectics, necessarily presupposes dialogue and is thus dia-logic) is the result of the fact that the sign is at once identical to and different from itself. It is only from the perspective of the abstract sign system that the sign seems to be characterized by the formula $A = A$. In the context of concrete semiosis the sign is not subject to a process of identification alone. Using formulas, we can represent identity of the sign as $A = B = C = D = E$ (where the sign “equal” does not annul difference, confrontation and otherness) given that sign identity is always indirect, mediated and problematic.

The sign “equal” indicates inference based on similarity and analogy in which the interpretant is of the iconic type. Identification of sign A more or less implies the following procedure: A i.e. B, i.e. C, i.e. D, i.e. E, i.e.... We arrive at its identity, which is not fixed and definitive, by establishing these relations which are not of mechanical synonymic substitution, but rather require interpretation and hypotheses involving not only deductive but also inductive and abductive inferences. The sign finds its identity in its very indeterminacy and instability, for it must appear as other in order to be *this sign here*. Given that we frequently require hypothetical and explicative identifications and not just those of the deductive and analytical type, the interpretant sign is often to be looked for in a distant system, and identified through a relation of hypothetical similarity (i.e. like the icon).

(6) *There is a necessary, inevitable relationship between dialogue and argumentation.* Each time we reason, we do so within the context of a dialogic relationship with another person, even when this other person is our own interior double self through which we evaluate the validity of a given argument. The problem of dialogue with the other does not only imply

the problem of the other understood as another person, but also the other as the internal double.

(7) *Dialogue does not commence with sign behaviour from a sender intending to communicate something about an object.*

The 'if...then' inference, or hypothesis formation, indeed any 'chain of thought' is dialogic in itself. In inference, in hypothetical argument, and in the chain of thought, which consists of the relation between interpreted and interpretant signs, dialogue is implied in the relation itself between interpreteds and interpretants.

In inference the relation between premises and conclusion may be considered in terms of *dialogue* between *interpreted signs* and *interpretant signs*.

The degree of dialogism and alterity is low in induction (where the relation between premises and conclusion is determined by habit and is *symbolic*) and in deduction (where the conclusion is a necessary derivation from the premises in a relation of the *indexical* type).

More specifically, in *deduction* the degree of dialogism in the relation between interpreted (premises) and interpretant (conclusion) (an indexical relation) is minimal: once the premises are accepted the conclusion is obliged.

Induction (where the relation between premises and conclusion is symbolic) is also characterized by monolinear inferential processes: identity and repetition dominate, but the relation between premises and conclusion is no longer obliged.

Instead, in *abduction* the relation between the argumentative parts is dialogic in a substantial sense. The relation between premises and conclusion is predominantly *iconic*, therefore a relation of reciprocal autonomy. Consequently, abductive inference can generate sign processes at high levels of dialogism and otherness. This type of inference is risky, inventive and creative. The margin for convention, or *symbolicity*, and mechanical necessity, or *indexicality*, is minimal.

(8) *Dialogism is not a prerogative of discourse.*

Not only verbal signs, but any situation or semiosis is a relational process which presents different degrees of dialogism. The relationship between sign and interpretant is dialogic and is so to different degrees.

Interpretant is a concept introduced in the framework of Peirce's semiotics.

According to Peirce, semiosis is a triadic process whose components include sign (or representamen), object and interpretant.

Something becomes a sign that stands for something else, its object under some respect, or idea, or ground, because it is interpreted by another sign, the interpretant, in an open chain of interpretants (*infinite semiosis*).

The meaning of a sign is a *response* by another sign, the interpretant, that calls for *another response*, another interpretant.

Something presses for a response and becomes a *sign*, that is, something has meaning, if there is another something which interprets it and therefore plays the part of response, that is, of interpretant; this interpretant, in turn, means something and becomes a sign, if interpreted as something which calls for *another response*, another interpretant.

Therefore a sign is a dialogue between an interpreted and interpretant, and semiosis is an open dialogue among various interpreted and interpretant signs.

The sign is firstly an interpretant, a *response* through which something else is considered as a sign and becomes its interpreted, on the one hand, and which is potentially able to engender an infinite chain of signs, on the other.

The dialogic relation between sign and interpretant has semiotic consequences from the perspective of the typology of signs, and logical consequences from the perspective of the typology of inference and argument. In light of Peirce's sign typology whether we have an *icon*, *index* or *symbol* depends on the type of dialogic relation between sign and interpretant. Therefore, given that the relation between premises and conclusion is also conceived in terms of the relation between sign and interpretant, the Peircean triad that distinguishes among *abduction*, *induction*, *deduction* also depends on the sign-interpretant relationship understood as a dialogic relation.

As we will see, in *deduction* where the relation between the premises and the conclusion is *indexical*, the degree of dialogism is minimal: here, once the premises are accepted the conclusion is obliged.

In *induction* which is also characterized by an unilinear inferential process, the conclusion is determined by habit and is of the *symbolic* order: identity and repetition dominate though the relation between premises and conclusion is no longer obliged.

By contrast, in *abduction* the relation between premises and conclusion is *iconic* and dialogic in a substantial sense. In other words, it is characterized by high degrees of dialogism and inventiveness as well as by a high margin of risk for error. Claiming that abductive argumentative procedures are risky means that they are mostly tentative and hypothetical with just a minimal margin for convention (symbolicity) and mechanical necessity (indexicality).

Therefore, abductive inferential processes engender sign processes at the highest levels of otherness and dialogism.

Signs and arguments are formally dialogic as the result of dialogue between “interpreteds” and “interpretants”, according to varying degrees of dialogism. From a semiotic perspective, the relationship between interpreteds and interpretants produces signs which (on a scale ranging from a maximum degree of monologism to a maximum degree of dialogism, otherness and creativity) may be prevalently “indexical,” “symbolic,” or “iconic”. From the perspective of logic, the relationship between interpreteds (premises) and interpretants (conclusion) results in arguments or inferences which may be “deductive”, “inductive” or “abductive”. The varying balance in indexicality, symbolicity and iconicity in any given sign situation (whether formally dialogic or not) involves variations in the degree of otherness and dialogism regulating the relationship between the interpreted (premise) and interpretant (conclusion) of an argument: therefore, argumentative value may also be measured in terms of the degree of substantial dialogism.

(9) All signs and all semioses are dialogically structured because they are founded on the dialogue between interpreted and interpretant.

As stated, what unites Peirce and Bakhtin is also a relational view of the world that opens out to the whole universe. To the global sign conception of Peirce, developed by Thomas Sebeok in terms of “global semiotics” or “biosemiotics” or “semiotics of life”, corresponds in Bakhtin the connection of dialogism with a conception of involvement of all living beings in a reciprocal and indissoluble interrelation.

According to Bakhtin dialogue is the embodied, intercorporeal, expression of the involvement of one’s body (which is only illusorily an individual, separate, and autonomous body) with the body of the other. The image that most adequately expresses this idea is that of the ‘grotesque body’ (see Bakhtin 1965) in popular culture, in vulgar language of the public place, and above all in the masks of carnival. This is the body *in its vital and indissoluble interconnectedness with the world and the body of others*. The ‘Copernican revolution’ operated by Bakhtin in relation to the conception of self, identity, and consciousness involves all living beings and not only mankind (‘From notes made in 1970-71,’ in Bakhtin 1986: 137).

Bakhtinian dialogue is not the result of an attitude that the subject decides to take towards the other. On the contrary, dialogue in Bakhtin is the expression of the living being’s condition of the biosemiotic impossibility of closure and indifference towards its

environment, with which it constitutes a whole system named *architectonics*. Bakhtin's interest in biology must not be forgotten as well as the influence exerted by the physiologist Ukhtomsky on his conception of the 'chronotope', and the presence in his work of references to the biologist "criptosemiotician" (as says Sebeok) Jakob von Uexküll.

At this point, a possible connection may be signaled between Sebeok's biosemiotic conception and Bakhtin's dialogic conception. These two authors seem very distant from each other. In reality this is not true. Bakhtin himself, as stated, was seriously interested in biology. He developed his own conception of dialogue in close relation to the biological studies of his time, and particularly to the totalizing perspective delineated by Wladimir Vernadsky (author of the book intitled *Biosphere*).

(10) *Dialogism is not reducible to communication. Dialogism and modeling* (see Sebeok and Danesi 2000) *are pivotal concepts in the study of semiosis.*

Communication is only one kind of semiosis that (together with the *semiosis of information* and the *semiosis of symptomatization*) presupposes the semiosis of *modeling* and *dialogism*. This emerges clearly if, in accordance with Peirce and his reformulation of the classic notion of *substitution* in terms of *interpretation*, we consider the sign firstly as an interpretant, that is to say, as a dialogic response foreseen by a *specie-specific type of modeling*. Moreover, Bakhtin's concept of dialogue also contributes considerably to extending this concept beyond the human world and connecting dialogism with semiosis in accordance with a global semiotic perspective.