COMMENTARY

(DIS-)CONTINUITY, (INTER-) CORPOREALITY AND CONVENTIONALITY IN DIALOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Commentary on Gratier & Bertau and Lyra

Chris Sinha

Maya Gratier and Marie-Cécile Bertau (2012) concisely state, at the beginning of their chapter, what can be understood as the common theme informing both their research and that of Maria Lyra (2012): "symbol formation," they write, "is bound to self formation in a mutual development which is itself inseparable from dialogical practices. Self and symbols are commonly traced back to joint practices and to the temporal dynamics these practices undergo through performances by mutually addressing partners" (Gratier & Bertau, 2012, pp. 1–2 in MS). These authors, then, address a fundamental and complex developmental problem: the ontogenetic and systemic-dynamic roots of the nexus binding symbolization, dialogicality and subjectivity.

Both chapters in Section 2 exemplify this contention in studies combining careful observational and analytic methodology with rich, dialogically-inspired interpretation. Their methodologies have in common a focus on the microgenetic temporal unfolding of dialogic episodes. Within this shared framework, they highlight different aspects of proto-conversational episodes; Gratier and Bertau drawing our attention to the temporal dimension of *simultaneity* and voiced *polyphony*, and Lyra highlighting the developmental dynamics of *successivity* and the changing *duration* of exchange episodes. Both chapters adhere to a methodological commitment and imperative that is succinctly stated by Lyra as follows: "The real facts to be observed by a developmental scientist are dialogical ones, given in dyadic exchanges between a baby and its caregiver" (2012, p. 2 in MS).

Gratier and Bertau take as their point of departure Bakhtin's (1984) notion of polyphony as "manifoldness of autonomous voices," adopting a phenomenological stance on voice-quality as, at one and the same time, *expressing* and *enacting* a personal stance within an ongoing relationship, and *addressing* (by affecting) the voice of the other through the incorporation (embodiment) of alterity. This methodological-interpretive starting point is subtle and complex, because it posits an intrinsic and foundational dialogicality and co-authorship to voice. Even while voice is the means by which situated selves are constructed within communities of meaning, in such a way that voice is "coupled with a specific, positioned utterance" (2012, p. 7 in MS), the materiality (and, most significantly, prosodic contour) of voice is neither primordially grounded by, nor developmentally appropriated by, a speaking subject that is identifiable with a single body. Instead, the authors claim, "voice is not defined as belonging to one body in a one-to-one correspondence. Rather, voice constitutes a multitude of happenings in one person who is seeking for the other's multitude in order to continue the dialogue" (Gratier & Bertau, 2012, p. 6 in MS). What this means is that voice is not the *means* by which dialogicality inserts or constructs subjectivity "within" the individual speaker or interactant. Rather, voice (in the normal course of development) is the very condition of dialogicality itself, and (inter-)subjectivity is the property of the intercorporeally entwined dialogic partners, whose positioning is accomplished and enacted in the dialectic of expressivity and addressivity that is the essential materiality of voice. It is in this sense that the co-presence of the voice of the speaker and the voice of the hearer, in each and every utterance, is the precondition for the performative elaboration of voice into symbol, and the dialogic infant self into a symbolic subject.

To put it another way, dialogue is a powerful "tool" or "niche" for the development of subjectivity and symbolization, not because it adds to interactions a new layer of mediated intersubjectivity, but because (in the form of—simultaneously—synchronized activity) joint corporeality (or intercor-

poreality) *already*, from the earliest interactions, presupposes and builds upon a mediated and shared infant mind. Gratier and Bertau do not claim that symbol and symbolic subject are already present in the earliest dialogues. Rather, they suggest that the developmental process leading to the establishment of symbol and symbolic subject is an elaboration of, not a superstructure erected upon, early voiced vocalizations occurring in dialogic contexts. As they put it, "in ontogenesis, the child does not leave a 'more simple' symptomatic and signaling mode of communication in favour of a complex symbolic one. Rather, the step into symbolization corresponds to an *enrichment* of the intersubjective dimension of expression-appeal" (Gratier & Bertau, 2012, p. 26 in MS).

Temporality, not only in the plane of succession and the plane of simultaneity of the interaction, but also in the shared history that shapes the answerability of voice, is vital to this process, because "the transformative power of dialogue belongs to the temporal dimension of any dialogue, to its historicity building up between partners through reiterated practice" (Gratier & Bertau, 2012, p. 12 in MS). What the authors call "the temporal patterning of alternation and simultaneity" (p. 16) (or turn taking and polyphonic co-vocalization) follows a prosodic pattern in which vocalizing in unison expresses and achieves heightened affect in the participants. In this way, the authors suggest, the interaction demonstrates a "narrative unfolding" in which voice pitch and intensity variation "create narrative tension and resolution" (p. 18, 20 in MS). Polyphonic co-vocalization facilitates "experiences of 'being together in time' and collaborative exploration of sound space and narrative time" (Gratier & Bertau, 2012, p. 23 in MS).

Although Gratier and Bertau acknowledge a distinction between what they term "preverbal and verbal forms of grammar," they propose that the synthetic combination, in polyphonic dialogue, of prosody, rhythm, turn-taking and co-vocalization can be seen as a "holoform" of narrative. The vocal dance of the partners in the space and time of alternation and simultaneity is crucial not only to the "grammar" of story-telling, but also to the dynamics of addressivity, opening the way to the adoption of variable stances and positions and the dialectical development of self through fusion ('we') and separation ('I' and 'you').

The historicity of utterance in the dialogic field and intersubjective field also permits the development of a specific kind of temporal displacement, the "anaphoric" orientation of both speaker (utterer) and addressee within and with respect to the "'order of language' itself"—as, we might say, participants in a dialogically constituted and mutually recognized Universe of Discourse (Mead, 1934; Miller, 1973). Drawing on Bühler (1990), Gratier and Bertau view anaphoric displacement as a precursor of representation and symbolization, which re-constitute, so to speak, the non-present as virtual presence in dialogue. It is the very familiarity of the narrative holo-

forms that also makes possible the interchangeability in polyphonic perfor- mance and enactment of voice and position, that "pre-figures all the later displacements in symbolic language use" (Gratier & Bertau, 2012, p. 36 in MS), and, we may suppose, constitutes the dialogical and socially situated self as a subject in speech, even if not yet a speaking subject.

The developmental shaping of the temporal envelope of dialogue over the course of repeated encounters between the dialogic partners is also at the centre of Maria Lyra's chapter. Lyra employs the method she calls Dia- logical Highlighting Dynamics, which enables the researcher "to identify actions that are performed by the partners in order to initiate, maintain and terminate the dialogical event" (Lyra, 2012, p. 4 in MS). The unit of dialogical analysis is the three-turn sequence that has been used in research in areas such as Conversation Analysis, consisting of initiation, response and acknowledgment by the initiator of the responder's turn. She identifies a developmental sequence of Establishment, Extension and Abbreviation phases in dialogical exchanges. Establishment involves the construction or introduction of an exchange as "shared dyadic knowledge." In exten- sion, "the previously established shared dyadic mutual understanding and knowledge serves as a 'background' against which the dyad can negotiate new elements … and elaborate extended exchanges" (Lyra, 2012, p. 5 in MS). Abbreviation, to which Lyra devotes most theoretical analysis, and which she considers to be particularly significant for the emergence of sym- bolic interactions, involves a reduction, in comparison with the extension phase, of the number of turns and the shortening of the duration of the dialogic episode.

Lyra notes that, from a communicative-functional perspective, symbols "abbreviate" extra-discursive reality in a manner that "frees the subject from functioning in an immediate time and space" (Lyra, 2012, p. 9 in MS). In this respect, abbreviation can be held to play an analogous role for Lyra to that played by polyphonic co-vocalisation for Gratier and Bertau, in bridg- ing presymbolic and symbolic dialogicality. It should be noted, however, that the infant's ages at which the abbreviation episode-types occur in the example dyad reported by Lyra (dyad J) are older (about 21 to 24 weeks) than those of the 3 month infants of the dyads studied by Gratier and Ber- tau. In the examples that Lyra gives of episodes occurring at around 3 months in dyad J, only extension is present.

In Lyra's analysis, abbreviation, as well as condensing the temporal en- velope of the dialogical episode itself, also *extends* the temporal horizon within which the episode is situated, signaling a major transformation and development of the dialogical self. Abbreviation episodes, she claims, are evidence of the onset of dialogic-systemic novelty, displaying characteristics of flexibility and adjustment. This, she suggests, represents a shift in learn- ing strategy, from a strategy based on response-contingency, to one based

on complementarity of roles/positions in an interaction frame that is mutually understood by both participants. This is how Lyra puts it: "A totality is abstracted and reconstructed from the immediate and contingent space of actions … this reconstruction exhibits a greater flexibility, allowing for the swift, smooth and adjusted integration of new actions within the abbreviated dialogue … abbreviation allows the emergence of self-positioning in a 'virtual space' of functioning" (2012, p. 2 in MS). My understanding of Lyra's claim is that the emergence of this "virtual dialogical space" not only permits the differentiation by the infant of dialogical positioning, but also the goals/intentions of actions from means for achieving them (communicative means-ends differentiation); and the transformation of an ecologically situated (dialogical) self to a semiotically situated (dialogical) self—situated, that is, in a virtual pragma-semiotic, dialogical space "that allows the subject to function in a dynamic, flexible manner, using past history and projecting the present towards the future" (Lyra, 2012, p. 7 in MS). In this way, abbreviation indexes the emergence of a *autobiographically* (and dialogically co-authored) situated self. Lyra cites in this context Bakhtin in support of the claim that, this being the (symbolic) space in which language works, its elaboration "requires a symbolic capacity" (2012, p. 7 in MS).

The chapters by Gratier and Bertau and by Lyra have a common starting point in the dialogical perspective and in the employment of phenomenologically informed, structured microanalytic methods. By "phenomenologically informed," I mean (in this context) that they are oriented to the "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) and elucidation of the experiential richness and meaning-fulness of the dialogical situation, the lived and living "vividness" of dialogue. This phenomenological stance should not be mistaken for attempting the impossible feat of reconstructing the infant self "from the inside," but rather represents a commitment to meaning over mechanism in the analysis of action and interaction. This methodological stance also entails a rejection of the reductionist notion that dialogical dynamics can be reduced to individual perceptions and actions—although Lyra seems to suggest that, before the phase of abbreviation, sensitivity to response contingency can account for her data. This proposal would, I think, be rejected by Gratier and Bertau, who would be more likely to insist that the infant participants, at 3 months and most likely before, evidence in their vocalizations (and in other bodily actions) a subjective *recognition* of *being engaged in participation*. I would side with Gratier and Bertau (or, rather, my interpretation of their work) on this question, but the issue is a complex one. Lyra might well acknowledge that even if, at the level of "mechanism," what she labels as "the immediate learning of contingent connections in the perceptual field" (2012, p. 2–3 in MS) is adequate to the psychological integration of infant actions with caretaker signals and symptoms, it remains

the case that the dialogic context of participation is "where the action is," methodologically, microgenetically, ontogenetically and semiotically.

It is also a natural corollary of the dialogical perspective that we prioritize participation, motivation and commitment in dialogue as being ontogenetically and methodologically prior to specific communicative or praxic intentions, and here I read the authors of these two chapters as being in broad agreement. Intentionality is inextricably linked with agency, and agency, for Lyra, is emergent in contexts of abbreviation, that instantiate distancing, perspectival switching and complementarity, and identification. Once again, we do not have to interpret this as implying that the "pre-agentive self" is merely reactive; rather, it is part of the condition of "dialogical closure" constituting primary intersubjectivity that, in the beginning, *there is no agency independent of participatory co-action*. In this, too, I concur with the authors of both chapters. I would, however, question the assertion by Gratier and Bertau that in such a perspective "the Other is not the powerful and the Self the helpless one." Although the active contribution of the infant to the dialogic situation and the dialogic episode is integral to the dialogical perspective and the emergence of the dialogical self, we surely can still recognize that control over situation and episode are unequally distributed in early interactions between the dialogical participants. It may be true that we all, in entering this world, are "fated to the condition of dialogue" (Gratier & Bertau, 2012, p. 9 in MS), but we are equally fated to the condition of dependence, with far-reaching consequences for human psychology and human communication.

Besides their common methodological commitments, these chapters also share an attentive focus on a process that is fundamental to the emergence of symbolization, namely *conventionalization*. Gratier and Bertau's notion of the acoustic-prosodic "holoform" that prefigures verbal narrative, their reference to proto-word production (at 5 months) involving canonical syllables and reduplications, and their positing of pre-verbal grammars of positioning and exchange, all involve dialogically-guided productions of forms-in-communicative context. Lyra's abbreviation episodes are, more or less by definition, constructed through the conventionalization and routinization of sequences recognized from previous dialogic episodes. These are important and provocative findings, that call into question the notion that conventionality is a property only of fully-fledged linguistic symbols. The evidence presented in these chapters is consistent with a theoretical interpretation of conventionality and normativity that regards the development of these as ontogenetically parallel with the development of dialogical intersubjectivity, rather than as something that emerges only at the end-point of "pre-conventional" developmental processes.

This brings us to the crucial question of the relation more generally between continuity and discontinuity in development. Where Lyra sees in the

emergence of abbreviated dialogic episodes evidence a developmental discontinuity that opens a "virtual dialogic space" that prefigures, and provides a *bridge* to, verbal symbol use, Gratier and Bertau see, in the prefigurations of narrativity, symbolic displacement and dialogic positioning that they observe in their younger infant dyad participants, more or less undeveloped *instances* of symbol and symbolic subjectivity. At the risk of oversimplification, Gratier and Bertau offer a continuity-biased story, with developmental elaboration consisting largely of the insertion of new contents into already established forms; while Lyra offers an account in which continuities are ruptured by the emergence of new forms. Here, I have to side with Lyra. Gratier and Bertau offer us convincing evidence of previously unreported complexity in infant dialogue participation at three months, and they are right to point to the neglected importance of the dimensions of addressivity and expressivity highlighted in Bühler's semiotic analysis of language and symbolization—dimensions neglected in many current accounts not only of symbol development, but of language use in general. As noted above, they do not claim that symbol and symbolic subject are already present in the dialogues they analyze, but they do suggest or imply that fundamental properties of symbolization and symbol use (narrative form, displacement and positioning) are already in place.

The method of phenomenological-analytic rich interpretation carries with it the danger of erroneously seeing homologies in analogies, and identities in similarities. The danger is that the researcher ends with a kind of phenomenological counterpart to the nativist hypothesis that individual cognitive capacities do not really develop at all, but merely "grow" new manifestations of already-present embryonic capacities, that already possess all the structural features of these later manifestations. Gratier and Bertau's adoption of a strong continuist stance seems to me to foreclose a theoretical focus on how novelty *transforms*, as well as building upon, existing structures and processes. For example, narrative "holoforms" are not, I would suggest, really narratives, precisely because they lack (a) the semiotic resources that transform "showing" into "telling," and which underpin true displacement (e.g. the insertion into the form of imaginary content); and (b) the orientation of the addressee to a perspectivized construal that situates the addressee in a third-person perspective. In other words, we can agree that "the child does not leave a 'more simple' symptomatic and signaling mode of communication in favour of a complex symbolic one" (Gratier & Bertau, 2012, p. 26 in MS), because the indexical and iconic aspects of polyphonic co-vocalization (and other early dialogic modes) are preserved, not abolished, in symbolic communication. At the same time, I would enter a strong reservation with regard to the second part of this quotation, which postulates that "the step into symbolization corresponds to an *enrichment* of the intersubjective dimension of expression-appeal" (Gratier & Bertau, 2012, p.

26 in MS). Indeed it does, but it also introduces a *rupture* of what Lyra, citing Bråten (1998), refers to as "dialogical closure." This rupture amounts to more than enrichment, it is transformation. To summarize this point, I suggest that dialogical approaches to development need to aim at understanding the way in which development involves discontinuity-within-continuity, and the way in which the entry into symbolization involves the elaboration of vocalization to verbalization, the grammaticalization of speech and semanticization of communicative intent.

Both these chapters adopt, as well as a phenomenological-analytic stance, a theoretical commitment to semiotically-informed developmental science. There are two particular issues that I would like to highlight in this regard. First, the importance, recognized by the authors of both these chapters, of viewing acts of communication and meaning through the prism of *embodied multimodal interaction*. The first and most important medium of dialogic communication is the body, or rather, the *jointly embodied performance* of dialogue. It is the recognition of this fundamental intercorporeality of dialogic engagement that sets the research programme pursued by these authors apart from other, more theoretically entrenched approaches that take cognitivist notions such as "intention reading" as their foundational concepts. Second, both sets of authors recognize the *materiality* of semiotic resources, a materiality that is particularly stressed by Gratier and Bertau in their analysis of "voice" as a vivid and jointly "owned" embodiment of the dialogic principle. I would suggest that this recognition can also fruitfully be extended to a more explicit attention to the semiotic status of the "extra-corporeal" resources that participate in the dialogic situation, in a quasi-agentive role. Lyra, for example, exemplifies her analysis of abbreviation using interactions involving the offering, giving and taking of objects. These objects can themselves be considered as "quasi-agents" in the dialogue, that is, they instantiate an extended embodiment that is fundamental to human communication, cognition and its development (Sinha & Rodríguez, 2008). Embodied multimodal communication extends beyond the skin, not just in the sense that embodiment is shared between the participants, but also in the sense that the interactions "vivify" all the material constituents of the dialogical niche.

Both chapters also provoke questions about the normativity, not only of the dialogic episodes themselves, but of the developmental trajectories of the dyads studied. This a large question, that I can only briefly touch upon. Gratier and Bertau, for example, cite evidence (including their own) that norms of conversational and proto-conversational overlap are culturally variable. Clearly, we need more cultural-comparative studies of dialogic patterning in early development, including the involvement of objects in early dialogue and multi-person interaction. Both these chapters report studies of dialogues in which infant participants are typically developing

individuals, and an important and interesting future research direction is to investigate atypical populations: for example, voice and multimodality in deaf children of both deaf and hearing caregivers.

I will conclude by saying that both these chapters represent genuinely innovative, in many respects provocative, contributions to our understanding of human development and its dialogical matrix. Their methodologically attentive and theoretically original observations and analyses of microdevelopmental processes set a high standard for continuing research in developmental-dialogical science.

REFERENCES

Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics,* C. Emerson (Ed., transl.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Bråten, S. (1998). Intersubjectivity communion and understanding: Development and perturbation. In S. Bråten (Ed.), *Intersubjective communication and emotion in early ontogeny.* (pp. 372–382). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Bühler, K. (1990). *Theory of language. The representational function of language.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins. (Originally published in 1934)

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures.* New York: Basic Books.

Gratier, M., & Bertau, M.-C. (2012). Polyphony: a vivid source of self and symbol. In M.-C. Bertau, M. M. Gonçalves, & P. T. F. Raggatt (Eds), *Dialogic formations: Investigations into the origins and development of the dialogical self.* Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishers.

Lyra, M. C. D. P. (2012). Self and symbol emerging from dialogical dynamics. In M.-C. Bertau, M. M. Gonçalves, & P. T. F. Raggatt (Eds.), *Dialogic formations: Investigations into the origins and development of the dialogical self.* Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishers.

Mead, G. H. (1934) *Mind, self and society.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Miller, D. L. (1973) *George Herbert Mead: Self, language and the world.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Sinha, C., & Rodríguez, C. (2008). Language and the signifying object: From convention to imagination. In J. Zlatev, T. Racine, C. Sinha, & E. Itkonen (Eds.), *The shared mind: Perspectives on intersubjectivity* (pp. 358–378). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Note to Author:

Please complete the following references, there should be a book title:

Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics,* C. Emerson (Ed., transl.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.