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Becoming other than we were: moments of transformation in dialogic communication

John Shotter, University of New Hampshire, USA*

Abstract

This paper explores the move away from the idea of speech communication as a process of information transmission, and explores instead the role of the spontaneous, living, expressive-responsiveness of our bodies. This opens up both «the active role of the *other* in the process of speech communication» (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 70), and the role of what we might call the «determining surroundings» of our utterance. For, on the one hand, the (often invisible) surroundings of our utterances can not only influence, i.e., give shape to, the intonational contours of our utterances, but also their whole *style*, our word choices, the metaphors we use, and so on. Thus, bringing our words back from their «free-floating» use – whether it be in committee or seminar rooms, in psychotherapy, in strategic planning in businesses, on the internet, or in just general conversations in sitting rooms – to their use within a *shared* set of «determining surroundings» is crucial if we are to understand how the «specific variability» in a speaker's expressions

* Correspondence address: John Shotter, KCC Foundation, 2 Wyvil Court, Trenchold Street, London SW8 2TG, England. E-mail: jds@hypathia.unh.edu

are expressive both of his or her unique «inner world», and of the unique «point» he or she wants to express, to make, in relation to *their* world. For it is only when our words are *at home* in the *determining surroundings* of their everyday use, that we can express our true identities as the unique individuals that we are or can be – any requirement that we express ourselves *only* within an established code is a limitation on who we are or can be. And it is our living openness to the *specific variability* in the expressions of others that can allow their «otherness» to enter us and make us other than we already are.

Keywords: embodiment; responsiveness; dialogical; contexts; differences

Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (thou). With a monologic approach (in its extreme pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness. No response is expected from it that could change anything in the world of my consciousness. Monologue is finalized and deaf to other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any force (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 292-293).

The «otherness» which enters into us makes us other (Steiner, 1989, p. 188).

All these types of expression, each with its basic intonations, come rife with corresponding terms and corresponding forms of possible utterances. The social situation in all cases determines which term, which metaphor, and which form may develop in an utterance expressing [a felt experience] out of the particular intonational bearings of the experience (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 89).

Logicians use examples which no one would ever think of using in any other connection. Whoever says: «Socrates is a man»? I am not criticizing this because it does not occur in practical life. What I am criticizing is the fact that logicians do not give these examples any life. We must invent a surrounding for our examples (Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 124).

My background, and the work I am engaged in at the moment – working either with family therapists or with organizational consultants – is totally to do with people communicating in living-face-to-living-face situations. So I have to admit, I am not only somewhat ignorant of the many activities occurring on the internet at the moment, but for a long time, I have been, and I am still, trying to come to an adequate account of living, face-to-face communication. And it is that *that* I will talk with you

about today. For this work has already alerted me to a number of issues and themes which, I feel, have not been attended to sufficiently in the past, themes that had they been more prominent might have prompted us to be more reflective about the possible limitations in our more digitized forms of communication.

Let me begin, then, simply by asking: How do we appear to others with whom we communicate? What are the crucial features of our expressions that make it possible for those with whom we meet to come to a sense of us as unique individuals, living in a unique situation, in a «world of our own», so to speak? What is it in our exchanges with others that not only makes psychotherapy possible, but also in many much more everyday situations opens us up to the possibility of being genuinely changed in our living encounters with the others and othernesses around us? What features might easily be excluded in our «digital» meetings with each other?

For me, there are two major features: (1) one is the importance of the *spontaneous, living responsiveness* of our living bodies – it is central to our everyday encounters with each other in quite a number of ways, as I shall describe in a moment, but that *spontaneity* is inevitably excluded in our digitized meetings with each other; (2) the second important feature emerges from the first: it is the fact that all our digitized communications must take place within *already devised codes of some kind*, and consequently *must* consist in *deliberately chosen* forms of expression – again, to repeat, the less controlled, spontaneously occurring aspects of our everyday forms of communication are excluded.

Why is the exclusion of these bodily displayed forms of spontaneous expression so important? I think for at least the following four reasons:

1. The first is the possibility of our being able to establish what I will call *shared moments of common reference* with those around us.

2. Another is the possibility of our coming to an inner sense of an other's way of being, of our being able to feel *their* inner movements within ourselves.

3. A third is the possibility of our coming to know «what it is like» (Nagel, 1974) to be the unique person one meets in each of one's daily encounters with the others around us, what *their world* is like.

4. Finally is the possibility of being able to create uniquely novel ways of «going on» in such situations, thus to move on from «stuck» social relations to innovate new forms.

But what is it that suggests these four reasons to me? What is so special about our spontaneous bodily responsiveness?

As I see it, there are certain moments in human affairs, in our active, living relations with the others around us, when a second person spontaneously responds to the utterances (or other expressions) of a first – both by actively listening and *responsively* replying to them – that a «living connection» between them both can be created, a moment that, following Bakhtin (1986), we might call a «dialogical moment» – or which, originally, I called a moment of «joint action» (Shotter, 1980), and later, an «interactive moment» (Shotter, 1993, p. 2). Central to the occurrence of such moments is the *spontaneous, living responsiveness* of our bodies, both to the others and to the «othernesses» around us, a responsiveness that we are often unaware of, but which we cannot wholly eradicate within ourselves. For if we did, then we would be quite unable to routinely understand each other; we would have to undertake complex deliberations in trying to «work out» each other's meanings in our expressions.

Once we accept the important role played by our spontaneous, bodily responsiveness in our understandings of each other's utterances, then we begin to see that another kind of account – rather than the usual *representational-referential* account we offer ourselves at the moment – is needed. We also need what I will call a *relational-responsive* account.

As Bakhtin (1986) puts it: «All real and integral understanding is actively responsive... And the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding. He does not *expect* passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his or her own idea in someone else's mind... Rather, the speaker talks *with an expectation* of a response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth...» (p. 69, my emphases).

Indeed, more than merely being actively responsive to another's utterance – a responsiveness that is displayed in our expectations of what an other will say next – we also understand them as speaking from within a particular relation to us. Hence, «... the meaning of the word per-

tains to a particular actual reality and particular real conditions of speech communication... [thus] we do not understand the meaning of a given word simply as a word of a language; rather, we assume an active responsive position with respect to it (sympathy, agreement or disagreement, stimulus to action). Thus, *expressive intonation* belongs to the utterance and not to the word» (p. 86, my emphasis).

This is crucial, for it is central to the main point of what I want to put forward to you today – the issue of what it is in the «otherness» of others that can enter us and make us «other» (than we were). But for the moment, I want to stay at the more general level, to say a little bit more about the possibilities for creativity and innovation that can be detected in the spontaneously occurring, dialogical moments in our living, face-to-face interactions. So I will return to expand on it further in a moment.

Sometimes, in our interactions, events occur that are a little different from what we routinely expect. Indeed, we often «mark» such events by saying that we were «struck» by them, or «arrested» or «moved», or «touched» by them. Wittgenstein (1980) noted the importance of such events, as being the possible beginnings of new language-games: «The origin and the primitive form of the language game is a reaction [...] Only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language – I want to say – is a refinement, ‘in the beginning was the deed’ (quoting Goethe)» (p. 31). «But what is the word ‘primitive’ meant to say here?» he went on to ask, «Presumably that this sort of behavior is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based *on it*, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought» (Wittgenstein, 1981, no. 541) – where, «the primitive reaction may have been a glance or a gesture, but it may also have been a word» (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 218).

In other words, what Wittgenstein is noting here, like Freud, is that there can be subtle «evidences» displayed in a speaker’s utterances which can give listeners an opening into a speaker’s inner world – Freud, of course, believed that those words that clients paused over when asked to associate freely to them were words indicative of conflicts in their lives.

Thus, picking up on what is actually expressed in our uttering of a word, or of a sequence of words, is what I want to talk about here today.

I want to try to focus on what can be heard in our *words in their speaking*, not what can be understood (as in studies in linguistics) from examining *patterns of already spoken words*.

But to try to focus on the unique «time contours» of the «inner feelings» aroused as the effects of another's utterance unfolds within us is not, of course, easy to do. It requires, as we shall see, a special kind of discipline. For we need to attend to events, always occurring in the «background» to the more «foreground» activities we do deliberately, usually without our awareness that in fact make our more deliberate activities possible. Thus, it is a discipline very different from the one into which, beginning even as young children, we have been trained into in the Western world.

In learning number patterns, or later, doing theorems in Euclidean geometry or algebraic equations, for instance, we are trained in a way of reasoning that depends upon «seeing» that two (or more) formal patterns, although located at different places at different times, are identical. It is a style of reasoning that trains us into developing a sense of what *certainty* in formal reasoning feels like. Hence, later, if we ever turn to philosophy, we find it quite «natural» to accept Descartes's (1986) appeal to a self-given certainty, and his resolve «to study no other science than that which [he] could find within himself or else in the great book of the world» (p. 35). Indeed, where else – other than in our selves (subjectively), or in the world (objectively) – might we look for the foundations of our knowings and understandings?

Thus, against this kind of background, in which such sure certainty seems to be possible, Wittgenstein's (1969) claim – that «I want to regard man here as an animal... As a creature in a primitive state... Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination» (no. 475), but in a much more unclear and chaotic form of activity, a form of activity that occurs only *between* people in their meetings – seems to be a major retreat from reason.

But I think that this *is* what we must do. We must understand our more self-conscious abilities as *social constructions*, as *achievements* that we can only accomplish with the help of others, achievements that we must struggle to accomplish afresh – for yet «another first time,» as Garfinkel (1967, p. 9) puts it – in each new, particular situation we encounter.

Thus, if we are to follow Wittgenstein, we must consider those aspects of our living activities that are always present, unnoticed, in the background, that «set the scene», so to speak, for all our more willful and intellectual acts as individuals. And to do this, rather than looking inwards and backwards toward the past (with the aim of understanding their causes), if we are to understand their workings, we must look outwards and forwards, towards how we can responsively create between us, in our more spontaneous and non-deliberate acts, ways of «going on» together within which our more individual ways of acting intellectually and willfully can be understood by the others around us. It is this bringing into the foreground of our intellectual considerations, their usually unnoticed «background», that, I think, is one of Wittgenstein's major achievements.

Indeed, as a consequence, as Wittgenstein (1980) sees it, there are *two* very different kinds of difficulties we can face in our lives: difficulties of the *intellect*, and difficulties of the *will* (p. 17). We can formulate difficulties of the intellect as *problems* which, with the aid of clever theories, we can solve by the use of reasoning. Difficulties of the will, however, are quite different. For they are to do with how we *orient* ourselves bodily towards events occurring around us, how we *relate* ourselves to them, the *ways* in which we see them, hear them, experience them, value them – for it is these are the *ways* that determine, that «give shape to», the lines of action we further *resolve* on carrying out. But we must do all this while we are already in action, in motion. As soon as we stop moving in relation to one or another purpose in our surroundings, our relations to our surroundings cease to be structured by the goals and aims implicit in our movements, and become structured by this, that, or some other way of thinking – thus to substitute a very different system of organizational valences.

This distinction is not easy to grasp, for differences between difficulties of orientation and difficulties of the intellect cannot be captured formally, they can only be captured in practice with respect to practical criteria. Wittgenstein (1980) calls these two kinds of difficulty, respectively, difficulties of the intellect and difficulties of the will: «What makes a subject hard to understand... is not that before you can understand it you need to be trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between un-

derstanding the subject and what most people *want* to see... What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect» (p. 17). Thus, as he puts it, what work in (his kind of practical) philosophy is aimed at, is not to provide any new information, but to change one in oneself, to change «one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them)» (p. 16).

Thus, if these changes cannot be effected by giving people good reasons to adopt new beliefs, by argument, how can one be changed? One must be changed in one's very being, and that can only be effected by being «moved» by an other or otherness in ways that one is unable to move oneself¹. As Steiner (1989) so nicely puts it: «The 'otherness' which enters into us makes us other» (p. 188).

As a consequence of our embodied living responsiveness to events in our surroundings, aspects of our utterances (and other responsive expressions) can be «shaped» by influences in our immediate situation, *as well as by those we also embody from our past experiences*. As Voloshinov (1986) puts it, in such *dialogical moments* «*the immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine – and determine from within – the structure of an utterance*» (p. 86, his italics) – the organizing centre is neither wholly *within* the individual psyche, nor *within* the linguistic system, «each and every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other'. I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong» (p. 86). As a consequence, the surroundings of our utterances – or their *background*² – must be accounted as «determining surroundings», in the sense that, in our being unavoidably responsive to events occurring within them, they exert «calls» upon us to act *responsively* in relation to them in «fitting» ways.

¹ Elsewhere, Arlene Katz and I (Katz & Shotter, 1996, 1998, 2004) have developed a whole approach to social inquiry, what we call the methods of a social poetics, built around being «struck by» the occurrence of certain events.

² «Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning» (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 16).

Voloshinov (1987) gives a nice example of the depth and complexity of what can be heard in the utterance of even a single word, and the character of what, relationally, it can achieve³. He describes a situation in which there are two people sitting in a room. They are both silent. Then one of them says «*Well!*» in a strongly intonated voice. The other does not respond.

As Voloshinov notes, for us, as outsiders, this entire «conversation» is utterly opaque. Taken in isolation, the utterance «*Well!*» is empty and unintelligible. Yet, for the two people involved this single expressively intoned word makes perfect sense; it is a fully meaningful and complete utterance. How can this be?

At the time the utterance took place, the two *Russians* involved *looked up* at the window and *saw* that it had begun to snow; *both knew* that it was already May and that it was high time for spring to come; finally, *both* were *sick and tired* of the protracted winter – *they both were looking forward* to the spring and *both were bitterly disappointed* by the late snowfall. «On the ‘jointly seen’ (snowflakes outside the window), ‘jointly known’ (time of year – May) and ‘unanimously evaluated’ (winter wearied of, spring looked forward to) – on all this the utterance *directly depends*, all this is seized in its actual living import – is its very sustenance. And yet all this remains without verbal specification or articulation. The snowflakes remain outside the window; the date, on the page of the calendar; the evaluation, in the psyche of the speaker; and nevertheless, all this is *assumed* in the word *well*» (Voloshinov, 1987, p. 99). But what is the point of such an utterance, what is achieved in its voicing?

It is perfectly obvious that it does not at all reflect, accurately describe, or *represent* the extraverbal situation confronting the two Russians. Nevertheless, it achieves something of great importance. As Voloshinov (1987) so rightly remarks, the utterance here «*resolves the situation*, bringing it to an *evaluative conclusion*, as it were» (p. 100), and in so doing it works to join the participants in the situation together as *co-participants* who *know, understand, and evaluate* the situation in a like

³ Here I am following Voloshinov’s text quite closely.

manner – for the other, the listener *expresses* his or her *agreement* by being silent!

In other words, rather than achieving something representational and intellectual in each of the individuals separately, the utterance achieves something bodily and relational in both together; it works to create a shared *orientation* toward their shared situation – a moment of common reference. Both now know that they feel the same in relation to the situation; they *share* it, and to this extent they can share various expectations of each other regarding each other's actions in their shared situation.

Indeed, if one person responds to another in a way sensitive to the *relations* between their actions and the actions of the other, so that they can come to act in anticipation of each other's responses, then they can be said, in some small degree, to *trust* each other. But if a second person feels the first to be pursuing an agenda of his or her own, then not only will that second person feel ethically offended at the first's lack of respect for them, they will also feel ethically offended at that persons' lack of respect for «their» joint endeavours (Goffman, 1967).

Thus, far from the extraverbal situation being merely the external cause of the utterance – by, say, exerting an impact on the speaker – it «*enters the utterance,*» says Voloshinov (1987), «*as an essential constitutive part of the structure of its import*» (p. 100). It enters it, in influencing the *intonational contour* in the voicing of the word «Well». Indeed, the speaker could almost equally as well have uttered not a word at all, but simply an «Ughh!» In other words, in general, the influence of interest to us is an influence exerted, to repeat, not in a *pattern of already spoken words*; it is in the unfolding temporal contours of *words in their speaking*. Thus for Voloshinov (1986), «the constituent factor for the linguistic form, as for the sign, is not at all its self-identity as signal but its *specific variability*; and the constituent factor for understanding the linguistic form is not recognition of 'the same thing', but understanding in the proper sense of the word, i.e., orientation in the particular, given context and in the particular, given situation-orientation in the dynamic process of becoming and not 'orientation' in some inert state» (p. 69, my emphasis) – a variability manifested in the unique contours of a utterance as it responsively unfolds in time.

But how can the unfolding temporal contours of people's utterances work, not only to achieve such an evaluative sharing of a situation, but also to express a person's own relation to their own expressions within it – whether they mean them to be taken seriously, treated as mere proposals, or even to be ridiculed (or so on)? And further, in situations in which our talk is *not* intertwined in with aspects of an immediately shared context, but in which we only talk with each other – as in academic seminar rooms, organizational conference rooms, or in psychotherapy, say – and do nothing else, is it still possible for us to gain, from the pausing, pacing, and intoning of their talk, a good sense of the invisible world of an other, and of their relations to it?

If it is, in what kind of world must we live for such happenings to be possible, for the temporal contours of people's expressions to work on and in us to such effects?

Thus, if it is the case that (in at least some of their aspects) *all* our activities are to an extent «shaped» by our body's ineradicable responsiveness to the unique character of their *surrounding context*, then any inquiry into their nature that fails to take account of this – any inquiry that is driven by «ready-made» textbook-methods, say, or any «interviews» conducted in accord with pre-established «schedules» – will inevitably miss important aspects of our activities. Indeed, they will miss just those aspects that make people's activities and their utterances *unique*, both to the persons concerned and to the situations within which they occur. They will fail to do justice to what a particular person *meant* by saying what they did, their «point», what they were trying to achieve at that particular moment in time and space – an ethical failure not only to fully respect how, what they expressed in their utterance, mattered to them, but, as we shall see, an ethical failure also to sustain the sense of an «us», of a collective-we, of all those of us who are involved in the communication in question, being influenced in the same way by the same *determining surroundings*.

All the remarks above, as I hope is now becoming clear, begin to orient us very differently toward our use of language than the more usual referential-representational accounts. Taken altogether, they begin to suggest that, not only, what a unique person takes his or her unique world to be,

at the moment of their utterance, but also how what they take to be their unique relation to it at that moment, also enters into and shapes the *intonational contours* of their utterance, and can thus, in some sense, be «heard» in the utterance. But, let me emphasize, all these aspects of people's utterances are, very largely, uttered as an aspect of the living responsiveness of our bodies to the others and «othernesses» around us.

As a consequence, this stream of spontaneously responsive, living activity, constitutes the constantly changing *background* of activity from out of which our more deliberately conducted activities can be drawn, and into which their results can return – what earlier I called the *determining surroundings* of our activities. If this *is* the case, the consequences are prodigious! It means that all spoken utterances contain within themselves the «reciprocal», as it were, of the particular circumstances in which, for the speaker, they are uttered. And thus written (or otherwise recorded) utterances can also – in their *style* – manifest aspects of the circumstances in which they might at first have been uttered. Thus, if we know how to listen for them, or to read for them, we can hear in written or recorded utterances – if not the actual, original conditions that worked to shape them in their speaking or writing – at least the *possible* human situations, etc., of their use.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) makes a similar set of points in claiming that in everyday, spontaneous talk, listeners do not need to *interpret* a speaker's utterances to grasp his or her thought, for «the listener receives thought from speech itself» (p. 178). It is present in the way in which speakers «give shape» to their utterances. Thus the «conceptual meaning» of a speaker's words «must be formed by a kind of deduction from a *gestural meaning*, which is immanent in speech. And as in a foreign country, I begin to understand the meaning of words through their place in a context of action, and by taking part in communal life» (p. 179)⁴.

⁴ Let me emphasize here that, by *gestural meaning*, Merleau-Ponty (1962) means to draw our attention to what I have called the «determining surroundings» of our utterances, the «particular context of action» in which they first appeared. When we do that, when we imaginatively work back from an utterance to the particular situation in which it must (or might) have occurred, then we find that the meaning of people's more «free-floating» utterances become clear to us.

In effect, we must ask ourselves: What kind of person, in what kind of situation, to what other kind of person, for what reason, would say such things? That is, what is being *done* by the use of these words, what is their *point*, what are people trying to achieve in using their words in this way? If we can do this, if we can reproduce the tone and accent of the speaker, we can begin to feel, he suggests, our way into their existential manner, the way speakers are *using* their words. We can begin to understand the meaning of their words in terms of their role in a particular context of action. In fact, all our speech (and writing) carries its relational meaning in its tone. «There is thus», Merleau-Ponty (1962) concludes, «either in the man who listens or reads, or in the one who speaks or writes, a *thought in speech* the existence of which is unsuspected by intellectualism» (p. 179).

Conclusions

What is central to everything above, then, is the move away from the idea of speech communication as being a process of information transmission, of the speaker as a source of information, of speech being a common code into which one puts one's thoughts, and of listeners as simply being decoders who have the task of arriving at the speaker's thought. This «model» of the communication process eradicates the role of two major aspects of the communication situation: (1) the spontaneous, living, expressive-responsiveness of our bodies, thus leaving listeners as *passive* listeners – in this situation, «the active role of the *other* in the process of speech communication is... reduced to a minimum» (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 70); (2) the other is the role of what I have called the «determining surroundings» of our utterance, the (often invisible) surroundings which, in our being spontaneously responsive to them in the voicing of our utterances, on the one hand, give shape not only to the into-

Thus, «In the same way», Merleau-Ponty (1962) continues, «an as yet imperfectly understood piece of philosophical writing discloses to me at least a certain 'style' – either a Spinozist, criticist or phenomenological one – which is the first draft of its meaning. I begin to understand a philosophy by feeling my way into its existential manner, by reproducing the tone and accent of the philosopher» (p. 179).

national contours of our utterances, but also to their whole *style*, to our word choices, to the metaphors we use and so on. But which, on the other, *orients* us toward the «place» of our utterances in our world, toward *where* they should be located or toward *what aspect* they are relevant, and toward *where next* we might go, i.e., their *point* – what they are trying to «construct» in speaking as they are.

In other words, bringing people's words back from their «free-floating» use – whether it be in committee or seminar rooms, in psychotherapy, in strategic planning in businesses, on the internet, or just general conversations in sitting rooms – to their use within a *shared* set of «determining surroundings» is crucial if we are to understand how the «specific variability» in a speaker's expressions are expressive both of his or her unique «inner world», and of the unique «point» he or she wants to express, to make, in relation to *their* world.

Indeed, this is Wittgenstein's (1953) whole point in suggesting that: «When philosophers use a word – 'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name' – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? – What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use» (no. 116). For, as he realized, all these «big words», as we might call them, remain undetermined and empty – and thus open to endless philosophical argument and interpretation – when divorced from their home in an everyday circumstance.

For it is only when our words are *at home* in the *determining surroundings* of their everyday use, that we can express our true identities as the unique individuals that we are or can be – any requirement that we express ourselves *only* within an established code is a limitation on who we are or can be. And it is our living openness to the *specific variations* in the expressions of others that can allow their «otherness» to enter us and make us other than we already are.

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