

Dialogism in detail: Per Linell's *Rethinking language, mind, and world dialogically* and its potentials

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Abstract

Per Linell's (2009) book *Rethinking language, mind, and world dialogically* offers an integrated view upon the many strands of Dialogism, establishing itself as an essential reference to the field. In this review of his book we aim to discuss a few selected topics, building upon these with our own views. Initially, we focus on the relevance and urgency of such book by summing up the most important dialogical concepts presented by it. Following our initial argument, we move on to the discussion of contrasts between monological and dialogical perspectives, the concepts of extended mind and the inter-world, suggesting Dialogism as an ontology, and finally, reflecting upon the relation between intersubjectivity and alterity. We conclude our review by stressing how Linell's book contributes to the unification of an entanglement of different dialogical theories and perspectives, crafting a solid meta-theory. This integration paves the way for a deeper understanding of what constitutes the nature of knowledge and human phenomena, as conceptualized by Dialogism.

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In the past few years, we have watched a growth in the emergence of theories implying a perception of reality as built by the relation between the human being and the world that surrounds it (Branco & Valsiner, 2010; Cunha & Gonçalves, 2009; Cunha & Salgado, 2008; Ferreira, Salgado, & Cunha, 2006; Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Salgado & Cunha, 2012; Salgado & Gonçalves, 2006; Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010; Toomela & Valsiner, 2010). Among these meta-theories, dialogism stands out by looking at reality as neither being something enclosed in the human mind (as centred on the ego) or something that exists exclusively on the outer world (as diluted in the context). Dialogism and its arguments have been addressed by many authors who made an effort to clarify the concepts inherent to this theory and, although these approaches have contributed to its expansion, they also brought a few disparities to the field (Linell, 2009).

Per Linell's (2009) book *Rethinking language, mind, and world dialogically* represents a significant effort of the author to gather and synthesize the most relevant concepts by articulating them in a way that is simultaneously easy-reading and intricate, and has become to us, since its publication, an outstanding, obligatory reference for anyone who wants to become familiarized with this theory. As put by Gillespie (2010, p. 463) in his review, Linell's book "consolidates dialogism as a distinctive, synthetic, and fruitful paradigm".

Linell's book starts by outlining the most basic principles of dialogism. The first dialogical principle views the human mind as a meaning-making system. Assuming that knowledge derives from the interaction with others and with the world, we can speak of the human mind as a social mind, which perceives information through the interactions with others and in contact with the outside world (Linell, 2009). This seems to be an important and revolutionary argument that allows us to understand our psychic functions as a system that contains not only our inner life, but also the outer world, in an integrated way. Meaning is not just a construction of the individual, neither is a photographic image taken from what reality has to offer. In fact, it is a combination between our vision of the world, the other's vision of the world and the characteristics from the world itself. This allows meaning to be shared and provides mutual understanding, but at the same time does not eradicate the individual signature from the meaning attributed to the world. In this sense, reality is not merely an individual *or* a social construction – it is instead an integrated surplus of both social, material and subjective worlds. In fact, reality has its own properties that we use to build meaning. So, this three-partied combination offers an innovative way of understanding how meaning is co-constructed.

The second theoretical principle, named intersubjectivity, emphasizes the role of the other in the acquisition of knowledge. Thus, "Humans are always

interdependent with others, although the degree and kinds of interdependencies will of course vary with individuals, cultures and situations” (Linell, 2009, p. 13).

Since birth, human beings communicate with the outer world. They use communication to create meaning from what surrounds them. The other is the main source of information and communication and is essential to provide the information needed. It seems only logical to look at the mind as a social mechanism; we conceptualize thoughts or cognitions as something that is not enclosed inside our heads, individual and intimate, but as a social product that derives from the social process that is meaning-making (Marková, 2000). When we are in contact with the world we communicate and at the same time we elaborate thoughts. Our thoughts are a form of communication, as they are constituted by signs; so what is the difference between thoughts and words? The vision proposed by Linell is interesting, seeing thoughts in the same way as language, as two similar processes, embedded in each other through their social roots.

For all that we have said earlier, we have to agree with this argument. When we are talking with the other, the words and the thoughts emerge in a very similar way, and we create new thoughts as the dialogue continues, and we modify our communication as the thoughts change. So, it seems that their difference could be thought as a matter of internalization versus externalization. Thoughts seem to be a type of internalized communication and are created as a form of response to the other, so we also conceive the acquisition of knowledge as a process directly dependent of the relationship we maintain with the world, so meanings are not merely intra-subjective (belonging only to the individual) but inter-subjective (belonging to the individual and the world that surrounds him).

The statement above meets the third theoretical principle, interactionism, where the construction of meaning is dependent on the interconnection with others, looking at both communication and cognition as interactional processes of knowledge acquisition. That is, as with communication, cognition is not an isolated process of the individual, but rather built on the relationship with others (Linell, 2009).

Contextualism comes as the fourth principle of dialogue, and reflects on how knowledge is acquired, being dependent on the context in which it operates. The context is referred to as dynamic and as a resource to be used (Linell, 2009). Thus, if the context provides elements that allow us to construct a reality, we can say that this construction takes into account not only the vision of the individual, but also the elements that are provided by this same reality. Of course the image that we get of reality is constructed through the relationship with others and the use of language as a semiotic mediator. However, some elements that are taken into this construction exist in fact in the outer world. It is assumed therefore that reality does not exist only from the perspective of each individual, which brings us to the fifth dialogical principle: the communicative constructionism, that is, reality exists outside the individual but is also built through communication with others (Linell, 2009, p. 19). Assuming that reality exists in fact, and that this reality is constructed through language, we can state that reality is not immediately built, but mediated

through its own semiotic resources, such as language. Language is therefore assumed as a form of semiotic mediation, that is, the use of symbols as intermediaries of knowledge acquisition (Linell, 2009).

As we have said earlier, knowledge and meaning-making imply that communication is constituted by signs. These signs represent reality but they are not the reality in itself. They are created by the individual, who is embedded by a cultural background and a dynamic context. So, signs integrate individual, social and cultural perspectives (Zittoun, 2007). It is common to see signs with different meanings in different cultures, but that evolves as the context in itself changes. For example, tilting the head at an angle to each side in many cultures represents not knowing how to answer a question, or “I am not sure about that”. In Southern India, this head gesture means precisely the opposite – “Yes”. Different cultures, different signs, different meanings. But signs develop as the context changes. Probably, due to globalization, signs will tend to evolve in a similar way, and the meaning of signs will become closer to each other, even in different contexts. It is also interesting to see how new signs appear in new micro-cultures, like Facebook, and how the internet context and its dynamic shows clear, and in a short period of time, how meanings evolve as the context changes and how the process of meaning-making is dependent on the process of communicating with others. The signs “:S” usually means a punctuation sign (:) and the letter S; while nowadays, for people who use Facebook, it can mean “I am embarrassed”. So, Linell’s argument about the communicative constructionism, where reality exists outside the individual but is also built through communication, gains new strength when we analyze and reflect on the meanings emerging from new ways of communicating (e.g. internet or text messages in mobile phones).

By wrapping up these principles in the very beginning of his book, Linell sets the levelling ground upon which he builds deeper and deeper in dialogism. Such an early clarification gives the reader a structured path through which one can safely get in touch with the book’s posterior developments.

Monological versus dialogical theories

Throughout the entire book, one can sense a tension between the so-called monological theories and the dialogical ones. To put it as Linell does, in a rough way, dialogism should be thought as a counter-theory of monologism, a counter-theory that tends to depict phenomena as a product of a reciprocal interaction process rather than a rigid one-way process. For instance, dialogism conceives meaning-making as constructed in the dynamics of interaction and properly accounting its contextuality and historicity. On the other hand, monologism views meaning-making as a process that takes place in the encapsulated mind of the individual, not accounting the variables mentioned before like time and context.

Even though their ontological and epistemological principles are different in theory, when one tries to state a practical distinction it becomes very hard to clearly establish what belongs to one or the other. Let us take the psychoanalytic theory

for instance; at first sight it seems obvious that it is a fully monological theory because its focus is mainly in the intrapsychic apparatus and the construction of meaning is mainly internal to the individual mind where the tension between the id, the ego, and the super-ego takes place. Despite this, the overcoming of the Oedipus complex that presupposes the identification with the other is taken as a vital step to the build-up of the intrapsychic apparatus, which can be seen as a dialogical movement of meaning-making towards the other. Our identity, our self is built with the help of an other being that according to the psychoanalytic theory resides on the outside of the individual mind, which seems to be allusive of the dialogical concept of “extended mind”.

Extended mind and the notion of interworld

The concept of “extended mind” is highlighted by the author as: “the mind extends beyond one’s skin, and its work is distributed on the individual in his or her environment” (Linell, 2009, p. 146). Such expression implies that the mind is embodied because it cannot be separated from our bodily nature, nor is its activity possible without the biological component of our organic system that allows us to connect to the world. This connection allows us to interact with others and the world, which grounds our meaning-making activity. This is also why we may call it extended, because if the mind is the main source of meaning-making and if others are a fundamental part of such process then we can assume that the mind is not circumscribed to its basic core and is distributed throughout the world.

If we conceive that meaning-making is a process constituted by far more than the individual self, then it is possible to think about the existence of a common ground between individuals. As Linell (2009) highlights, such possibility is somewhat related to the concept of “interworld”, which states that “meanings, understandings, contents (thoughts) and ideas are interrelational phenomena between individual and between the subject (who thinks, understands, means) and the affordances of his or her ecosocial” (p. 160). The thinking activity for instance is inherent to our existence as human beings and it seems impossible to determine the exact moment when our first thought took place. Despite this, it is known that the content of our thoughts reflects the experiences that we previously had in the outer world and because its content is mainly linked to language use – which is a process learned in the interaction with others – then thinking can be situated in the “interworld”.

Dialogism as ontology

For us, the elaboration of reality as a concept may very well be the most substantial development of this book’s initial section: in an historical journey, reality has been conceptualized in many (usually conflicting) ways. The central discussion frequently becomes whether reality is a sole product of the mind – one that is encapsulated inside our very own intrapsychic windings – or something that exists merely

in the outer world, like if reality itself would be completely independent from our existence. To these contrasting perspectives, Dialogism responds with an integrative view, by which reality is conceptualized as a human construction that takes into account the external elements presented by the world. In a similar manner, culture is embodied in our view of the world and its historicity transcends the precise moment of interaction, which implies that meaning-making is not merely a creation that takes place on a given relational moment. As highlighted by Gillespie, “Linell insists that ‘situation transcending’ phenomena precede any interaction, framing the interaction and providing resources for it, and, in turn, are incrementally transformed through the interaction” (2010 p. 461).

In a way, culture acts as an organizational framework that introduces *a priori* elements that precede and influence the situated interaction, therefore framing the meaning-making processes and the construction of an identity. The relationships that make way for the individual development occur in a cultural framework that influences and is influenced by the intersubjectivity (Cunha & Gonçalves, 2009). As Cunha and Salgado (2008) affirm, “there is no such thing as a solipsistic and isolated mind or thinking in complete isolation” (p. 168). In this assumption resides the possibility of human interaction resulting in a viable construction between two knowing subjects who carry different backgrounds. So, the perception of a common reality elicits the necessary commonality that is an essential property of intersubjectivity. If individuals would apprehend their own conceptions of reality based solely on their individual constructions without accounting for all the pre-existent properties, each and every individual would have its own “personal chaos” and there would not be any bridges with what others depict as their realities. Dialogism, as Linell sees it, tries to depict how we acquire knowledge through the interaction with others but also emphasizes how knowledge – and therefore reality – is constituted. So, as Linell implies, we may say that Dialogism is not only an epistemology but also an ontology, in the sense that it “emphasizes the ontological primacy of relationship which leads to a conception of the psychological realm as inextricably interconnected with communicational processes.” (Ferreira et al., 2006, p. 27).

Intersubjectivity versus alterity

In terms of the discussion between intersubjectivity and alterity, Linell almost merges the concept of intersubjectivity with the one of commonality, viewing this as the most essential property of the communication process because it creates a common ground between two or more participants in a dialogue, and that is what makes an interaction possible: common knowledge, norms, same language, among other things. This common ground justifies why people begin to interact in the first place. The interest in sharing information with someone that has partially the same perspectives of the word, the same meanings, is stimulating – but is that enough? For us, if it would be that way, then new meanings of the world would not exist because we would all share the same thoughts, meanings and visions, and there

would be no innovation. To incorporate innovation in an interaction we have to rely on alterity as an essential property of interaction (Cunha & Gonçalves, 2009). The confrontation between different perspectives allows new meanings to emerge. This is what promotes an adaptive functioning on a world that is constantly changing: innovation, creativity, difference. But conflict and tension are also present. So these two properties, in spite of being very different, work inseparably from each other. Which is the most important one? Some say that if there was not anything similar between two participants in an interaction there would be no interest in interacting at all (Ferreira et al., 2006). But this is just what initially compels us to communicate. Then, our differences appear, and sharing those differences becomes the main objective of interaction.

For all that has been said, if we see commonality and alterity as different but part of the same process, we have to disagree with Linell when it comes to saying that commonality and intersubjectivity are the same concept, and then, alterity is treated as a different thing. For us, intersubjectivity implies these two concepts: it encompasses both commonality and alterity. If neither one is present then we cannot talk of a real intersubjectivity. As we stated, our view goes in another direction, one in which alterity assumes an equivalent (if not primary) role in communication. We do need a common ground for communication to take place but, to construe a valuable outcome from that process, we must face an essential conflict brought by the differences between the two entities of such communicational act. We believe that it is the negotiation between different perspectives and ideas that creates the space for novelty in interaction. As Cunha and Salgado (2008) strongly suggest,

for communication between individuals to occur, there must be not only (some degree of) coordination, reciprocity and mutuality between them, but also complementarity, asymmetries and difference (since a mutual coordination and communion will never be absolute) that feeds the dialogue forward. (p. 167)

This may become very clear when we think about the therapeutic relationship where the balance between commonality and alterity seems essential to promote a good outcome. Empathy is assumed as the foundation that connects both client and therapist and allows for the joining of perspectives. Along the therapeutic process, the empathic connection will defy the client's monological view of his world and promote change by facing the conflict (alterity) with the therapist's view or with the views of significant others in the client's life (a confrontation with real otherness). By creating an environment where the client may step outside of his/her problematic pattern and place himself/herself in a more distanced position – an observer position (Leiman, in press) or a metaposition (Hermans & Kempen, 1993) – the therapist's interventions may foster the necessary space between the client and his/her problem, enabling the necessary innovations in the way of seeing him/herself and eliciting change (Ribeiro, Bento, Gonçalves, & Salgado, 2010; Ribeiro & Gonçalves, 2010).

For all that has been said, dialogism brought an innovative but clear and simple way of understanding how we create meaning of the world that surrounds us. This helps us to comprehend how we build our personal identity and how we develop an image of ourselves and all that is around us. Meaning is not just a representation of the reality, neither an individual representation. If we look at this process as a continuous dialogue with others and the world, we can integrate the different perspectives that contribute to create new meanings: individual, social and cultural perspectives. Linell has made a strong contribution with his book, bringing together the different dialogical constructs and theories and creating a dialogical manual that can serve as a guide to understand, in a new and enlightening way, how we know what we know, and ultimately why we are what we are. The problem of understanding the nature of knowledge is therefore closer from resolution.

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