

**SELF, SYMBOL AND SUBJECT: A COMMENTARY
ON LYRA'S "ON ABBREVIATION; DIALOGUE IN EARLY LIFE"**

Chris Sinha
University of Portsmouth, UK

ABSTRACT. Lyra presents a methodologically sophisticated analysis of the ontogenetic course of microgenetic processes in infant-caretaker interaction. The article raises important issues concerning the relationship between microgenesis and ontogenesis. Lyra's argument that the microgenetic phase of abbreviated dialogue constitutes a seed of, or precursor to, the semiotic function is convincing. I question, however, both Lyra's extension of this to an assumption that symbolic dialogicality is thereby already established, and her interpretation of the common ground of co-participation in terms of shared knowledge. I conclude by noting that developmental analyses such as Lyra's have an important role to play in the conceptual clarification of dialogic theory.

Maria Lyra (2007, this issue) addresses a fundamental and complex developmental problem: the ontogenetic and systemic roots of the nexus binding symbolization, dialogicality and subjectivity. The theoretical and methodological difficulty for researchers lies in the mutuality and interdependence, not only of the conceptual categories of symbolization, dialogicality and selfhood, but also of the developmental processes that construct these categories as competences and attributes of persons. Lyra herself points this out, by noting that the synthetic notion of the "dialogical self" implies a space of shared symbolic resources and a symbolic capacity. Yet, she maintains, infants already inhabit a shared dialogical space considerably before symbolization and language, even while the latter is as much a condition for, as a consequence of, selfhood as understood by classical thinkers such as George Herbert Mead.

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AUTHOR NOTE. Please address correspondence for this article to the author at the University of Portsmouth, Department of Psychology, King Henry Building, King Henry I Street, Portsmouth PO1 2DY, United Kingdom. Email: Chris.Sinha@port.ac.uk

of persons. Lyra herself points this out, by noting that the synthetic notion of the “dialogical self” implies a space of shared symbolic resources and a symbolic capacity. Yet, she maintains, infants already inhabit a shared dialogical space considerably before symbolization and language, even while the latter is as much a condition for, as a consequence of, selfhood as understood by classical thinkers such as George Herbert Mead.

Lyra’s quest, then, is to explore the emergence of this nexus, in which the very process of emergence implies the partial differentiation of a “threefold cord” (Putnam, 1999) of which self, symbol and dialogic communication are the inextricably entwined strands. Since nothing, ontogenetically, can emerge from nothing, what is the prior, as-yet-undifferentiated wellspring of the symbolic and dialogic self? Lyra’s answer to this is to postulate a pre-symbolic and transitional “functioning space”, which she characterizes as “virtual” in the sense of having some characteristics of a symbolic space, characteristics which permit novelty creation. This transitional space she identifies with a specific interactional format or type that she calls *abbreviated dialogue*.

How can Lyra’s proposal be related to accounts of the emergence of symbolization, theoretically traceable to Karl Bühler’s psychology of language but often currently formulated in terms of joint attention, that emphasize the centrality of *triadic intersubjectivity* (Bühler, 1990; Sinha, 2004; Tomasello, 1999; Zlatev *et al.* in press), and in particular of subject-object-subject interactions? First, and most evidently, the examples that Lyra presents are of infant-caretaker interactions at ages (from about 20 weeks upwards) that are well below those usually advanced as characteristic of proto-symbolic triadic interactions (typically well into the second half of the first year of life, or as Tomasello puts it, the “nine month revolution”). In this respect, we could perhaps say that Lyra is proposing that “abbreviated dialogue” constitutes a transitional phase between Trevarthen’s primary and secondary stages or modes of intersubjectivity (Trevarthen & Hubley 1978; Trevarthen, 1979).

Second, Lyra’s proposal focuses not only on the immediate interactive situation in temporal isolation, but also on the structural transformation of interactive exchanges in a developmental and temporal trajectory. Abbreviated dialogues are recognizable as such precisely *because* they involve the performance of the “same” (type identical) action (often involving the same object) as developmentally preceding interactions, differing only in their structural and temporal characteristics. In respect, therefore, both of the general contours of development, and of the history of specific episodes of dialogic engagement, Lyra’s account emphasizes emergent change and novelty within fundamental continuity, rather than radical discontinuity.

It is precisely this fact, that the abbreviated dialogue has a history within the common experience of both participants, that underpins its structural characteristics and

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developmental status. The phase of abbreviation is the successor to that of extension, in which the negotiation and elaboration of joint action leads to an increase (compared with both preceding and succeeding episodes) in the number and duration of interactive acts. The methodological lesson of the studies Lyra reports is that longitudinal studies are indispensable if we are to fully understand how ontogenesis is articulated with, is in some sense even composed of, temporally ordered microgenetic episodes. However, this cannot be the same as saying that ontogenesis is *reducible* to ordered microgenetic processes. First, it is the overall synchronic developmental state of the organism that opens or potentiates the space of possible microgenetic transformations, not all microgenetic processes being available or prompted at all stages of development. Second, and conversely, there may occur a recapitulation of certain microgenetic processes at different levels of organization (as in the well-known example of U-shaped developmental curves). In the current context, the question remains open as to whether the sequence of emergence-extension-abbreviation is applicable to microgenetic processes of interaction across ontogenetic levels, or whether it is specific to infant development in the first half of the first year of life. More generally, I would have liked to have seen some more explicit discussion of the relations of the microgenetic processes Lyra discusses and analyzes to broader, stage-like characterizations of the ontogenesis of symbolization in the research literature.

Leaving that question aside, we can then ask Why, and How, does the abbreviated dialogue take on its particular quality of concealing, even while transforming, the range and variety of actions making up episodes at earlier occasions? Lyra draws an explicit parallel with abbreviated or elliptical conversational utterances, in which what is said is merely the tip of an iceberg of shared mutual knowledge. Abbreviation, she claims, “is achieved by previously constructed internalized mutual knowledge between partners. Therefore, it is not necessary to externalize all elements of the ... message” (p. 22). Lyra’s contention that what is at stake is *knowledge* is repeated in her conclusion, where she states that “the infant and his/her mother have constructed a shared knowledge that allows differentiating the mother’s intention from the specific actions that achieve the communicated content” (p. 39). In this, Lyra follows a widely accepted assumption that the most appropriate way to characterise the “common ground” (Clark, 1996) that communicators share and appeal to is in terms of reflexively shared knowledge.

In what sense, though, can we really say that *either* participant “knows” either some kind of “content” that is to be communicated (semantics), or something about the best or most appropriate way of going about such communication (pragmatics)? Is “knowledge” the right term for characterising what is shared by infant and caretaker, and is intersubjective engagement always best characterised in terms of intentional states? Sinha and Rodríguez (in press) argue that early intersubjectivity is better understood by prioritising joint action, understood in terms of co-participation, over

mental states such as knowledge and intentionality. Our argument is that by so doing, we can better understand the dialectic of discontinuity within continuity, without making mentalistic attributions whose logical theoretical terminus must be the postulation of innate mental contents.

This issue takes us to the heart of Lyra's contention that infants are "able to establish dialogical exchanges before the establishment of any language or constituted symbolic system" (p. 21). In support of this, she argues, firstly, that abbreviated dialogues manifest a reduced three-turn structural composition, and secondly that the emergence of novel actions indicates an emergent differentiation of communicative intention from the specific actions that are used to implement the communication. In relation to the second of these proposals, Lyra also suggests that, in abbreviated dialogues, the actions become the "object of negotiation" between the communicative partners, implying the externalisation of action and its incorporation as an aspect of the "external" world. We could, perhaps, say that Lyra is proposing that the development of abbreviated dialogues indicates a very early stage of "pre-predication", in which the history of interactions becomes a kind of argument on which novel actions are predicated, permitting the negotiation between the partners of their positioning within the interaction. This would be one way of construing her distinction between responsiveness to point-by-point contingencies and a functioning space "more detached from the immediate space of actions" (p. 38) in which the history of the actions becomes ritualized.

This kind of "detachment", however, is not the same as the distinction between a signifier and its signified, since there is no indication that the infant is communicating *about* something distinct from the actions that accomplish the communication. Furthermore, although ritualization is often recognized as a precursor to true, normatively based conventionality, it is not equivalent to this. In this respect, I would regard it as an over-interpretation to say that infants are able to "negotiate their actions in order to construct a mutual understanding" with the caretaker—the question being, mutual understanding of *what*, other than the engagement in the interaction itself? Signifier-signified (or sign-object) differentiation, displacement and conventionality are frequently thought of as the hallmarks of symbolic sign use proper (Hockett, 1960; Sinha 2004). It is, I think, a mistake to collapse such semiotic and epistemological distinctions in such a way that sign use is seen as characteristic of all modes of participation in socially and culturally constituted interactions.

In summary, Lyra's methodological innovations and her careful analysis are admirable and compelling, and her identification of the microgenetic structure of abbreviation as the seedbed of semiosis is empirically well grounded. My principal reservations about her account are (1) that it nonetheless remains vitally important to distinguish the precursors of the semiotic function from its earliest true manifestations, including those which are "proto-symbolic" in nature; and (2) that the employment of a

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discourse of “knowledge/intentionality” makes unnecessary concessions to cognitivist and nativist developmental accounts of a kind very different from Lyra’s own perspective. These two critical reservations are linked, since the danger of emphasising continuity of engagement over discontinuity in sign use is that it leads us to the conclusion that infant knows everything, as it were, about signs and about communication, long before being able to manifest a genuinely communicative use of signs.

Finally, the issues raised by Lyra, and the questions that I have posed regarding her interpretations, have implications much wider than developmental psychology alone. If we were to accept, with Lyra, that dialogicality is not *per se* dependent on the mastery of discursive symbolization, in what sense could dialogicality still be seen as a species-specific marker of human personhood? And in what sense can human *subjectivity* be seen as a language-dependent extension of a more fundamental dialogical-ecological selfhood, previously constituted in pre-symbolic co-participation (Lemos, 2000; Lightfoot & Lyra, 2000; Nelson, 2000; Sinha, 2000)? Furthermore, in addressing these questions, how far can we assume that the microgenetic patterns Lyra identifies are transcultural? Whatever the answers to these questions, I believe that both developmental and dialogical sciences can only benefit from the recasting of genetic epistemology in a communicative and semiotic framework, as exemplified by Lyra’s innovative and thought provoking article.

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