

## AN INTERVIEW WITH EDDA WEIGAND<sup>1</sup>

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**MCB:** Mrs. Weigand, it was a pleasure to read your inspiring and rich book, not least because I think that a dialogic perspective on language is urgently needed in linguistics, and also in the domains addressing human activity, such as for instance pedagogy and psychology. So, I would like to know about the acceptability of the dialogic stance within linguistics – do you see any substantial changes in the discipline? (In Germany, in Europe, in the USA)

**EW:** As you know, there is no one discipline linguistics as such; there are various different approaches, among them semantic, pragmatic or discourse analytic ones. Pragmatics is still struggling to come to terms with its object and methodology. I think dialogue is the proper key to pragmatics. In recent years the focus on dialogue has been strengthened by various publications, in Europe as well as in the USA. With the pragmatic turn, our concept of language has changed from language as a sign system to language-in-use. Approaches dealing with language-in-use – dialogue analysis as well as pragmatics and discourse analysis – therefore belong to linguistics in a broad sense.

**MCB:** Yes, linguistics became a discipline with various branches, it has diversified since the times of de Saussure. But as you speak of ‘human linguistics’ I understand your enterprise as a real challenge to linguistics – where linguistics is deeply related to a certain *attitude* towards the phenomenon of language, leading its investigation as detached from human subjects and their activities. This is not to say that this kind of detachment is not possible or not legitimate, but it is questionable as the primary approach to language.

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was conducted by Marie-Cécile Bertau (MCB) and is coordinated with her review of Edda Weigand’s (2009) volume, *Language as Dialogue: From Rules to Principles of Probability* (S. Fuller, Ed.; Amsterdam, The Netherlands, John Benjamins) published in this issue (see pp. 17-35). The interview was conducted electronically as a written exchange between MCB and Edda Weigand (EW).

So, I understand your enterprise not just as addressing pragmatics. It seems to me to aim at a reversal concerning our scientific perspective on language: only starting with dialogic interaction will allow an adequate understanding of language. Am I right with these inferences regarding your notion of ‘human linguistics’? If I am right, I am still interested in the acceptability of such a fundamental reversal.

**EW:** What I called ‘human linguistics’ is indeed a challenge to compositional models of orthodox linguistics. What ‘human linguistics’ means is best expressed by Marco Jacoboni in his blurb on the cover of my new book “Dialogue – The Mixed Game”: “If you are interested in language, you must study who’s speaking it: human beings.”

The ‘acceptability’ of such a view depends on how it can be justified. First, when de Saussure set up the dogma of language as a sign system, he was well aware of the fact that the sign system is different from language proper or ‘la parole’. At the time he was writing, ‘la parole’ was a concept which was too complex to address directly. He addressed it via the hypothesis of an underlying artificial level of ‘la langue’ which he established by definition and total abstraction from all variables of use. The hope of arriving at ‘la parole’ by starting from ‘la langue’ turned out to be illusory. There is no other way than to start directly with the natural object of ‘la parole’ and to derive an adequate methodology from it. This is the challenge a ‘human linguistics’ needs to take up. The acceptability of a theory is closely connected with its type of theorizing in relation to its object: we are finally prepared to address our complex object directly by making a change in theorizing from reductionism to holism.

Second, we are in the happy position of having experimental results from neuroscience at our disposal. They confirm that our abilities are not isolated abilities, there is no system of signs, but a complex network of integrated and interacting abilities. The brain is no longer a black box which allowed us to put forth any hypotheses whatsoever.

**MCB:** My next question continues this topic: I think that one of the challenges related to the opening of the closed-system linguistics lies in the necessity to open up disciplinary separations, so it is also an institutional endeavour – would you agree?

**EW:** Of course, we need to open up the scope of linguistics. In the same way as there is no language as such but the human ability of speaking integrated with other human abilities, there is no discipline linguistics as a separate study of language. Linguistics is interrelated in a cross-disciplinary fashion with other disciplines, such as psychology or anthropology, since they all deal with human abilities.

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**MCB:** I agree, and I would like to add that the other disciplines should also integrate more explicitly a *pragmatic* notion of language, I am thinking especially of psychology which would have to go beyond a cognitive view of language.

**EW:** Any scientist should be clear about its object, whether it is an artificial concept of language or the natural concept of language-in-use. I don't see any sense in dealing with an abstract concept of language such as the sign system or an exclusively cognitive system. There are no signs which have meaning on their own, no proof whatsoever of what cognitivists call a 'mental lexicon'. It is human beings who use verbal and cognitive means in an integrated manner when negotiating meaning and understanding in dialogic interaction. It is in the end the complex human mind where the scientific activities of different disciplines dealing with human behaviour meet. Even if dialogue is rooted in the human mind, it is more than 'the shared mind': it becomes manifest as dialogic action.

**MCB:** Dialogical Self Theory addresses the dialogic processes constituting the self, internally as well as externally. It is assumed that dialogues take place between different individuals or groups as well as within the self of an individual; dialogical relations are thus developed both externally and internally, and psychological processes are related to social contexts and exchange practices.

What kind of relationship do you see between this theory and your theory of language as dialogue? Or, put another way: What could be the impact of dialogically conceived language on such a theory of self?

**EW:** Whereas the focus of Dialogical Self Theory is psychological processes resulting from human beings' dialogic nature, the focus of the Theory of Language as Dialogue is integration and action: *integration* of psychological processes with other human abilities, mainly speaking and perceiving, and *action* in the sense of a dialogic theory of action which goes beyond orthodox speech act theory. The single speech act is dialogically dependent, either as an initiative act or a reactive act; action not only comes about by speaking but by the integration of speech with other human abilities. It is the emphasis on the integration of human abilities at the level of dialogic action which can enrich the Dialogic Self Theory.

**MCB:** Regarding your answer, I would only like to add one remark, maybe you would like to react to it. The psychological processes as they are assumed and modeled in the Dialogical Self are not just or not only *expressions* of a dialogical nature. Rather,

specific dialogical practices develop and form this “nature”, or the individual in specific ways. This is especially true of early development where processes of acquisition take place, but also of subsequent development in the course of life – not to forget intervention strategies which work dialogically, i.e. which *form* (new) developments, such as psychological therapy. Hence, from a developmental stance, a theory of language which addresses language as dialogic practice is interesting particularly in regard to the issue of a formative function of language.

**EW:** I completely agree with you. Human beings are by their very nature dialogic beings. Dialogical practices in our early childhood will, of course, strengthen our dialogical abilities.

**MCB:** Dialogical Self Theory builds very much on the views of the language investigators and thinkers of the 1920s in Soviet Union, most importantly on Bakhtin's notion of dialogicity. Did you consider this approach, to what extent does it play a role for your considerations?

**EW:** When I began developing my theory of language as dialogue in the 80s, Bakhtin's reflections on literary texts did not play a role. After the publication of my first book on this subject matter in 1989 (“Sprache als Dialog”) I became aware of approaches referring to Bakhtin and felt confirmed in my own view. Bakhtin's general notion of dialogicity comes close to my concept of language as dialogue but also includes dialogue and interaction between words and texts. Dialogic relations between words and texts need no longer be intentionally created by authors but wait to be discovered by the reader. Bakhtin's work helped to push the dialogic view but represents rather a collection of interesting aspects than a concise theory. Dialogue is more than a network of relations between words and texts. It is created by human beings turning relations into actions. Actions, to my mind, are intrinsically bound to agents who act intentionally. An extended concept of action without intentionality or of words as agents can only be understood as a metaphor.

**MCB:** I agree that dialogue is more than a network of relations, and I think that this focus on intertextuality is due to one prominent way of reading Bakhtin after his discovery in the West. This is, as it were, another way of detaching language from human activity. Nevertheless, insofar as Bakhtin locates dialogue not only between speaking and listening physical persons but also between different consciousnesses, dialogicality reaches into the psychological dimension, touches on psychic processes; dialogicality becomes available for the self which becomes itself a dialogical process.

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Further, with Bakhtin, dialogicality occurs between utterances as uttered with specific voices and positions to which the actual speaker has to take a stance: utterances lose their neutrality, and their authorship becomes more complex, as well as the notion of intentionality. For the DST and its central notion of position, this is of utmost interest. What kind of role does position play in your view of dialogue?

**EW:** With the topic of intertextuality and different voices we face an area of interpretation which is crucial for literary texts but has its place in everyday language use as well. In using certain phrases speakers may refer to phrases of other speakers and may hope that the audience will notice it and understand the specific meaning. We are thus shifting to the readers and their way of interpreting a text. If we include the area of interpretation we accept a complex notion of dialogism or – as I called it in my new book – multidimensional dialogue. Within multidimensional dialogue we can distinguish between different subdomains, among them dialogue between readers about their different interpretations of a text or the domain of polyphony, i.e. of splitting the speaker into different voices. Within this universe of dialogue DST and its central notion of position can also be embedded.

In 2009, at the University of Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, IADA, the International Association for Dialogue Analysis, organised a big international conference on “Polyphony and Intertextuality”. Selected papers will be published in a volume of “Dialogue Studies” (Benjamins) on the topic of “Spaces of Polyphony”, edited by Clara Ubaldina Lorda.

**MCB:** Thank you very much, Mrs. Weigand.

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