

DIALOGICAL SEQUENCE ANALYSIS IN STUDYING PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT. Dialogical sequence analysis (DSA) is a microanalytic method of analyzing utterances. Based on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of utterance it states that, when communicating, individuals simultaneously position themselves with regard to the referential object and the addressee. Depending "about what" people are speaking and "to whom" they direct their words affect the style and composition of their utterances. Such positioning is semiotic in the sense that the referential object is always construed by personal and historically formed meanings. The historicity of subjective construal applies to the addressee as well. Utterances are often complicated by the fact that there are often hidden or invisible addressees in addition to the ostensible interlocutor. DSA developed in the context of psychotherapy supervision and process research. The article introduces a meta-model of psychotherapy process, which claims that all therapies strive to create a joint observational stance for making sense of clients' problematic experiences. Hence, the psychotherapies provide a natural laboratory within which internal experiences become tangible through expressions and utterances. The fundamental unit of analyzing the double positioning in relation to the topic and the addressees is *semiotic position*. Being a relational concept, it cannot be used to single out and categorize distinct units of speech. The way by which semiotic positions are identified in DSA will be illustrated by three excerpts from psychotherapy literature.

Psychotherapy research is a disciplined reflection of therapeutic practices. Clients and therapists work jointly toward an understanding of the client's presenting problems and attempt to find productive solutions, alternative ways of action or more constructive ways of relating to the problem. The psychotherapy researcher is an outsider that observes and examines the recordings of therapeutic exchanges or the pre-controlled constructions of clients and therapists that have been generated through interviews, rating scales, or structured recalls. The researcher is trying to make sense, afterwards, of an extremely complex process of joint action and communication that are mediated by the participants' ways of understanding what they are doing together and what the problem at hand is.

An ordered reflection of any substantive area calls for some conceptual abstractions that spell out its basic features (Leiman, submitted). In psychotherapy research, we will need a bipartite theory of psychic phenomena and how they are

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modified by psychotherapeutic processes. Various schools of psychotherapy have different views about the targets of therapeutic work and the nature of the processes that modify them. Cognitive behavioral therapists tend to focus on clients' maladaptive belief systems and how they mediate emotional processes, interpersonal relationships, or everyday actions. The technical array used by the CBT therapists involves ways of addressing the erroneous beliefs by structured observations and behavioral tasks that show how the internal and external aspects are interrelated (Beck, 2005). Kleinian psychoanalysts regard the clients' "unconscious phantasies" as the main target of analytic work and interpretations as the main instruments in client change (Klein, 1926/1985; Segal, 1986). Mindfulness or mentalization based therapies focus on the problematic qualities of client self observation and recommend meditative techniques to foster accepting and less judgmental ways of perception (Germer, Siegel & Fulton, 2005; Allen, Fonagy & Bateman, 2008).

Psychotherapy process research is challenging because of this differing self understanding of both the target and the process in different therapeutic orientations (Peräkylä, Antaki, Vehviläinen & Leudar, 2008). A meta-level conceptualization that spells out the common core of all psychotherapies is vital for the development of the field (Salvatore, Gelo, Gennaro, Manzo & Radaideh, 2010). Within the research using dialogical sequence analysis in the frame of the assimilation model (Leiman & Stiles, 2001; Stiles & al., 2006), a tentative meta-model has emerged and will be briefly presented in the following. The formulations in the model are important for an understanding of the specific ways by which intra psychic and interpersonal phenomena are related in DSA.

The common core of the psychotherapies

In psychotherapy research literature, there is a long tradition claiming that despite the technical differences, all psychotherapies depend on some common basic processes (Rogers, 1957; Frank, 1973). There is, however, different ways of conceptualizing such processes. In the literature, the model of choice conceives of them as a set of factors that can be measured (Orlinsky, Grawe & Parks, 1994; Norcross, 2002). This conception is dictated by the methodological constraints of linear statistical modeling that accommodates poorly to the developmental and transformative nature of psychotherapy. Consequently, it tends to produce an ever growing amount of process variables, which usually account for a fraction of the total variation in the studies (Norcross, 2002).

Within psychoanalytically informed research, there is a growing emphasis on processes that contribute to clients' growing ability to self observation in therapy (Bucci, 1997). A related view is expressed in research on the role of meta-cognition in different disorders and its development in successful cognitive psychotherapy (Semerari, Carcione, Dimaggio, Nicolo, & Procacci, 2007). Cognitive analytic therapy,

or CAT for short, (Ryle, 1990), similarly, emphasizes accurate self observation as the salient mediator of client development. The jointly created reformulation by client and therapist concerning the client's problematic patterns of action and experience underlying the presenting problems will be an effective tool only, when clients can make use of it.

If self observation is such an important factor in psychotherapy, there must be something to observe. All psychotherapies work by stimulating client expression in one way or another. Verbal therapies rely on words, art therapies work with painted, musical, or literary material. Behavioral therapies focus on patterns of action, bodily expressions, and so forth. Body-oriented therapies and psychodrama use various techniques and tools to enrich the client's verbal utterances by other forms of expression. Whatever is done, the aim is to generate "material" that will serve as data for joint observation and in due course client self reflection.

Fostering client' expression and helping them to adopt a self-observing stance concerning the presenting problems and the underlying problematic patterns of action and experience constitute, in my view, the fundamental twin process of all psychotherapies. The techniques that are favored by any therapeutic orientation fall within these two categories. One set of techniques are aimed at stimulating and shaping client expression. The content of expression is then jointly reflected on either by more or less freely directed dialogue or by using structured, tool-mediated modes of observation. Free association, symptom monitoring, problem diaries, and mindfulness exercises illustrate such devices. Most of the techniques of self-monitoring, favored in cognitive and cognitive-behavioral orientations are tools of organizing client self-reflection.

To summarize, all psychotherapies aim at generating self-observation that, gradually, permits an altered relationship to the original problem, whatever it may be. Reflective function (Fonagy & Target, 1997), meta-cognition (Semerari & al., 2007), mentalization (Allen & al., 2008), and mindfulness (Germer & al., 2005) refer more or less to the role of an observing stance to personal issues that are expressed in the consulting room. These terms suggest that we are concerned with a mental function or a skill that can be deficient but can be attained or improved by the appropriate help of the therapist during psychotherapy.

Self-observation as positioned

In CAT, "the observing eye" was introduced in the 1980s as a metaphor for describing a self observing attitude to one's actions in the world as well as to intrapsychic processes and experiences. The metaphor implied that self-observation is positioned and reciprocally related to whatever is observed. In dialogical self theory (DST), a related view was introduced in the concept of the I-position (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loom, 1992). The main difference of the two conceptions lies in the

way of understanding the acts of self reflection. In CAT, the position from which self observation is carried out is reciprocally determined by what is being observed. Dialogical self theory used the “I’s movement in a landscape” as the basic metaphor to describe acts of self reflection.

Despite their differences in emphasis, both formulations are important for understanding the nature and role of self observation in psychotherapy. Instead of regarding it as a skill or a mental function, self observation is conceived of as positioned activity in relation to its objects, whether external or intra-psychic. Instead of “reflective function”, “meta-cognition”, or “mentalization” we might adopt the concept of *observer position* as the common mediator of client change in psychotherapy.

Observer position emphasizes self-observation as an activity that relates reciprocally to its objects, for instance, aspects of self, personal feelings, ways of perceiving, ways of evaluating actions, and so forth. Clients come to therapy with their habitual ways of observing and understanding themselves. One of the problems is frequently an overly evaluative or self-critical attitude through which clients perceive their actions and experiences. Depression and anxiety are symptoms that are usually accompanied by excessive self-criticism. This implies that self observation is already positioned, when the client enters in the consulting room. The joint task in therapy is to help the client establish a new, conscious, and hopefully a neutral or a more benign position from which the excessively self-critical or judgmental ways of self perception can be observed. A jointly created observer position is, thus, a meta-position in relation to the clients’ habitual modes of self reflection.

With personality disordered or traumatized clients the situation is more complex. In addition to being inarticulate, their self observation is frequently state dependent (Ryle, 1997). They also fail to articulate the difference between self and other (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Semerari & al, 2007). Psychotherapists must then help the clients to generate or set up an observer position that will transcend the dissociation of time and situation. In such cases, the character of a meta-position becomes even clearer than with clients whose self perception may be biased or partial but not state dependent.

In therapies with personality disordered clients structured techniques, such as deliberate distancing (Linehan, 1993), mindfulness exercises (Palmer 2002), two chair techniques (Warvar, Links, Greenberg & Bergmans, 2008), diagrammatic reformulations, and observation charts (Ryle, 1997) can be used if necessary. It should, however, be recognized that merely describing our experiences to another person immediately puts us into an observer position regarding those experiences. The clients’ self perception may be blurred and state dependent, but the repetitive act of expressing themselves to the therapist stimulates the development of an observational stance to personal experience. Although not immediately useful for severely dissociated clients,

the classical technique of free association in psychoanalysis illustrates this quite well. It is an early precursor of the current mindfulness exercises.

Cooper (2004) articulates differing qualities in the observer position by employing Buber's I-Thou and I-it ways of relating to objects of activity and experience. From this vantage point he is able to show that distancing clients from the immediacy of their experiences is only the first step in the dialectical development of self-observation. Full acknowledgement and re-engaging with the problematic experiences will be necessary to integrate dissociated aspects of self. This may happen when the client relates to these "not me" objects of observation as internal "subjects" that have their own voice, wanting to be heard.

A constructive observer position will eventually lead to an increased awareness of the initial problems and also an altered relationship to them. In the I-moments approach (Gonçalves & al, 2009; Matos & al., 2009) this stage is called re-conceptualization. Narrative therapists talk about re-authoring the original problem story (White & Epston, 1990). Empowerment (Timulak & Elliott, 2003; Timulak, 2007) is also a frequently used term to denote the change that is salient for the psychotherapies.

While this is in general a desirable end, the concept of empowerment remains unfocused. It refers to a potential, which is actualized after successful therapy as a new way of being in the world. In the meta-model of psychotherapy process, outlined here, an altered and empowered relationship to the presenting problems, symptoms, or unwanted repetitive action patterns is defined by the concept of *subject position*.

Compared with empowerment, it has no social, normative or value laden attributes. Moreover, in line with the concept of observer position, it compels us to spell out the specific objects of activity and experience to which an empowered relationship is generated. It is difficult to measure empowerment as a feature. It is easier to explicate the qualitative changes that characterize the subject position in relation to the initial problem. Hence subject position is an important concept for client focused outcome assessments.

The meta-model of psychotherapy process is summarized by the following diagram (Figure 1). It is a modification of the Assimilation of Problematic Experience Stages (APES) continuum, introduced by Stiles in the assimilation model (Stiles & al., 1991). The original eight-stage continuum described how the client's problematic experiences were transformed in successful psychotherapy. Initially being warded off (APES 0), the problematic experience would soon show up in client expressions as symptoms and unwanted thoughts (APES 1). An observational stance was reached in stages of a vague awareness (APES 2) and problem formulation (APES 3) that generated a potential for insight (APES4). Subsequent stages represented the working

through phase in therapy, which generated an altered relationship to the problematic experiences and eventually problem resolution (APES 7).

The diagram below describes quite a similar developmental sequence, added with the idea that an individual's relation to problems is positioned. Even self-observation is reciprocally related to whatever is being observed.

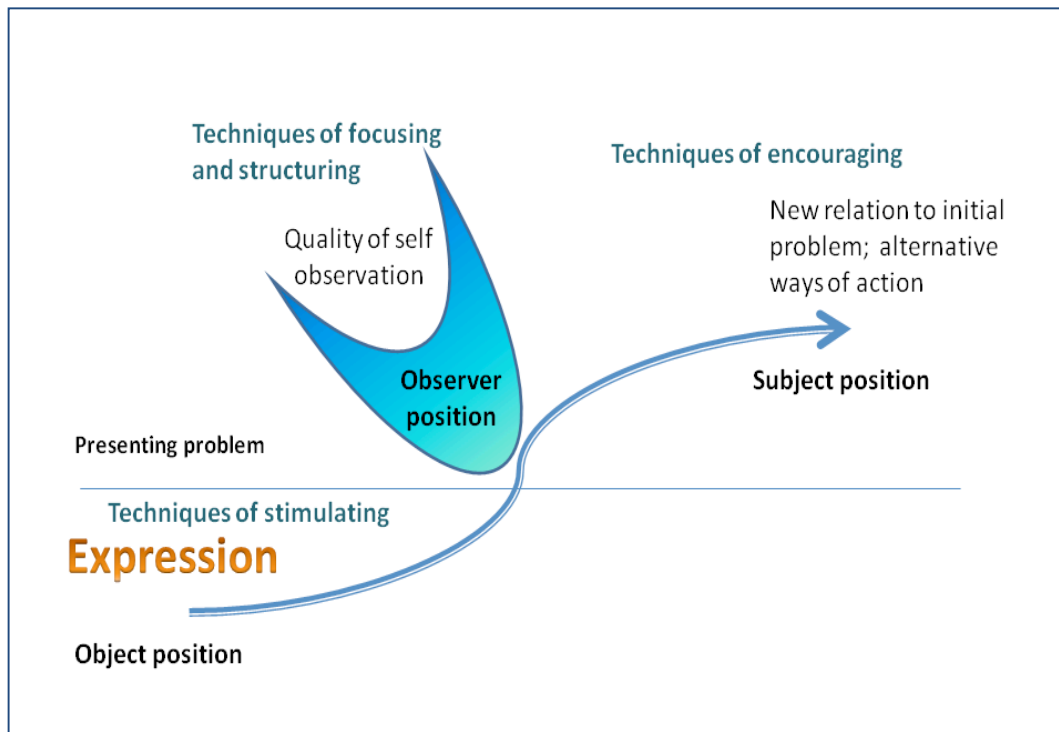


Figure 1. Meta-model of psychotherapy process

When clients enter psychotherapy they are beleaguered by their presented problems or symptoms, denoted in the diagram as an *object position* in relation to the problem. It is present in the client's expressions that form the "material" for joint reflection in therapy. Depending on their orientation, therapists may use various techniques of stimulating or structuring client expression. Conversation is, however, the basic mode of expressions in most psychotherapy.

By attending to peculiarities and repetitive patterns in client expression, therapists help focus client attention on salient themes or patterns and stimulate an observational stance to what is being expressed in the session. Again, depending on orientation, therapists may use structured techniques to assist the client in reaching the observer position and in improving its quality. However, as pointed out above merely describing one's experiences to another puts the person into an observer position. From this new vantage point, clients may perceive their original problems in a new light and

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begin to work over them. In this stage therapists may use specific techniques that encourage client experimenting and rehearsal. Often clients, however, find their own ways of dealing with situations that used to trouble them. This is denoted in the figure as reaching a *subject position* in relation to the original problems.

The diagram still leaves out perhaps the most important aspect in any psychotherapy. The path from the object position to the subject position proceeds within the client's zone of proximal development, or the ZPD (Wilson & Weinstein, 1996; Leiman & Stiles, 2001; Caro Gabalda & Stiles, submitted). In the beginning, clients may experience the therapeutic situation yet unsafe. They also fear, more or less consciously, "what may come out" as they begin to disclose their experiences to the therapist. Research has convincingly shown that therapeutic alliance is a developmental phenomenon that depends both on the client characteristics and the therapeutic setting and the ways of therapist approaches the client (Kivlighan & Shaugnessy, 1995; Haas, Hill, Lambert & Morrell, 2002). Client expression both in terms of amount and content depends on the initial conditions of the therapeutic relationship and how appropriately the therapist takes them into account. A premature exposure to a technique that is meant to intensify or enhance client expression, as for instance two-chair dialogue, may be counterproductive. If the technique suggested by the therapist does not fall within the client's ZPD it is doomed to remain ineffective and often disturbs the process (Zonzi, 2009; Caro Gabalda & Stiles, submitted).

Having outlined the general developmental model, or meta-model, of the psychotherapies, the next step is to discuss how it relates to DSA. It was stated above that we will need a bipartite theory of psychic phenomena and how they relate to psychotherapy process. The developmental model attempts to spell out the latter aspect of the theory. Psychic phenomena become tangible and externalized in the peculiar laboratory of joint activity that the psychotherapies provide. The laboratory is focused at bringing client experience out and providing the conditions for its undisturbed observation. In Bakhtinian terms, "the word wants to be heard" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 127) and psychotherapy provides a stage for it.

Client experiences do not, however, display their content and dynamics straightforwardly. They are clothed in the symbolic forms of symptoms or hidden memories of past events that may be too painful or shameful to reveal directly. In order to make sense of client utterances, the therapists need a theory that elucidates the relationships between utterances and psychic processes. DSA has developed this part of its theory through a two-decade integration of the basic concepts cognitive analytic therapy with Bakhtinian theory of utterance. The concepts were introduced in an earlier paper (Leiman, 2004) and their relationship with Bakhtin's theory of utterance has been recently elucidated in more detail elsewhere (Leiman, 2011). In what follows, the concepts will be briefly presented in relation to the basic assumptions concerning intra psychic processes and communicative utterances. On the basis of this outline, the focus

for the rest of the paper will be on the concept of *semiotic position*, which is the basic unit of analysis in DSA.

Basic assumptions of DSA

DSA was originally developed to help therapists to bridge the gap between client utterances and the internal processes that mediated them. The practice of early reformulation in cognitive analytic therapy (Ryle, 1990; Ryle & Kerr, 2002) exacerbated the question how psychic phenomena become manifested in the content and dynamics of expressions. In CAT, the therapist and the client strive jointly to formulate the recurring patterns of actions that account for the client's presenting problem. These action patterns are mediated by habitual, internalized patterns of relating to self and others (Ryle, 1975). The patterns can be recognized in various domains of life, areas of activity, ways of experiencing events, dreams, imagery, and beliefs. The clients are not often fully aware of them and will need the therapist's help in order to identify and recognize them. The therapists, however, do only have a mediated access to the patterns, which are embedded in client utterances as they talk about their life, their recurring problems, and their often unsuccessful attempts to deal with them.

In order to construct a formulation of the internalized patterns of action and experience, the therapists need a set of concepts that spell out the structure of action sequences and the intra psychic patterns mediating them. In CAT it is called *semiotic object relations model*, described in more detail by Ryle and Kerr (2002). The basic assumptions underlying the model were originally derived from a parallel reading of Vygotskian theory of sign-mediated activity and the British psychoanalytic object-relations theory (Ryle, 1991; Leiman, 1992). DSA shares these assumptions that may be briefly expressed in the following way:

1. Human activity is object-directed (intentional).
2. Subject and object of any activity are reciprocally positioned.
3. The general structure of external and psychic activity is similar.
4. Both internal and external actions are sign mediated.

The first and the third assumptions are fundamental in cultural-historical activity theory that developed on the basis of Lev Vygotsky's work (Vygotsky, 1978). It is impossible to conceive of any activity without spelling out its object. Psychoanalysis and phenomenological traditions in psychology share this view, but they regard the objects either as intentional (phenomenology) or objects of desire (psychoanalysis). In the Vygotskian tradition, objects reveal themselves originally in the joint, practical, transformative actions of human beings and receive a semiotic presentation that can be shared in communication or used in the psychic construction of the objects (Davydov &

Radzikhovskii, 1985). Hence, the first, third and fourth assumptions necessitate each other. The fourth principle can be seen as a qualification of the third, which Leontiev once expressed concisely: “External and internal activities have a similar general structure. The disclosure of the common features of their structure seems to me to be one of the more important discoveries of contemporary psychological science.” (Leontjev, 1978, p. 61).

The second principle is another important qualification of the thesis that every human action is object oriented. It stems partly from Melanie Klein’s assertion of the reciprocal relationship between internal objects and the experiencing subject that may be discovered in people’s unconscious psychic processes (Klein, 1926/1985). In CAT theory, the mutual positioning of subject and object is usually confined to interpersonal relationships and intra psychic self-to-self relations, designated by the term of *reciprocal roles* (Ryle, 1975). In the DSA theory, this conception is extended to include all object-oriented activity in addition to human relationships (Leiman 1997).

An early envoy of this idea in the philosophy of consciousness was Peter Auriol, a XIV century Franciscan (Biard, 2007). When studying visual illusions, he formulated the idea that the positioning of the object is reciprocally related to the position of the perceiving subject. One of his examples was the apparent motion of trees on the riverbank when viewed from a journeying boat. Auriol stated that in any act of perception the perceived thing is placed in *esse apparens* or in an object position in relation to the perceiving subject.

Auriol focused on perception, but subject-object reciprocity can be recognized in any field of activity. A simple illustration of the principle is walking along a footpath and hitting a stone. If it is small, it rolls aside. If it is heavy, the foot gets hurt. Our movement and the direction it may adopt depend on the reciprocal positioning of the object of our action

Reciprocal patterns and sequences

Both external and internal actions are object directed. The actor and the object relate reciprocally to each other. Hence, the basic concept of analyzing unfolding activity is the reciprocal pattern, originally termed as reciprocal roles (Ryle, 1975). A broader term of *dialogical pattern* was adopted in the DSA theory, because subject-object reciprocity features all activity and not only interpersonal relationships. The acting subject and the object of activity position each other reciprocally, as in Peter Auriol’s account of the voyager and the apparent movements of the trees on the river bank. The positions of both are altered reciprocally to each other when the boat moves on. In the DSA theory, *position* and *counter position* are used to denote the reciprocal relationship between subject and object. The word “counter” does not imply any contrasting or conflicting relationship to the other position. The term was adopted to

indicate the subject's perspective of the subject in relation to the object in the reciprocal pattern.

When studying such patterns in sequences of activity we will notice that the object's counter position governs the subject's available course of action. A game of chess is a model illustration of this principle. The relative positions of the opponent's pieces on the chessboard shape the player's choices of the next move. Except for the final stage of the game, the player has several options for movement. The counter positioned objects do not determine mechanically the course of action. However, the rules of the game ensure that every choice entails a re-positioning of pieces that the opponent can use when deciding on the next move.

In the DSA theory, the *dialogical sequence* is used to denote these reciprocally mediated sequences of action. The term was originally chosen (Leiman 1997), because psychic processes often proceed like rejoinders in a dialogue. Dialogue is also a salient domain of social activity. The basic assumption of the identical structure between external and psychic processes extends the concept of a dialogical sequence to instrumental actions as well. In this context the term is somewhat misleading. We do not speak of a dialogic relationship between a saw and a log when we describe the unfolding action of sawing, although subject-object reciprocation is the central element in the sequence. Describing a game of chess in terms of dialogical sequences seems to stretch the boundaries of "dialogical" as well.

The adoption of the term is an illustration of how every conceptualization is a child of its time. Originating in Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) dialogism and the concept of polyphonic novel, the term had by the 1990's been transferred to the psychological analysis of action and personality (Hermans, Kempen Van Loom, 1992; Shotter, 1993). The term "dialogical" was thus available and ready to use. Another reason for choosing it was its immediate association with Bakhtin's theory of utterance, which had a fundamental role in linking psychic processes with overt expressions and external actions. Sequences of reciprocal positioning characterize internal as well as external actions.

Melanie Klein (1926/1985) was an early representative of this idea. She described sequential fantasies that were enacted by small children in play. They were often variations of fears or nightmares from which the child had suffered. The child could attack the analyst in fantasy by devouring her, burning her, pushing her out of the window, or by other sadistic means. In the next turn, the destroyed fantasy figure was transformed into a retaliating monster, threatening the child with equally sadistic procedures. This compelled the child to escape and seek shelter. The reciprocal sequences of internal object relations, as Klein conceived of them, were indeed dramatically visible in the child's utterances and play activities.

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Klein was a pioneer in recognizing how internal processes and mental contents became discernible in utterances. Her interpretive framework that reduced the rich variety of symbolic expressions to unconscious fantasy chains mainly involving body parts and excrements is, however, not sustainable. Words, nonverbal expressions, and gestures do not provide shortcuts to clients' internal world. Referential links between utterances and psychic processes will only gradually emerge, when something tends to be repeated in the ever changing flow of client expression.

Even if we assume that psychic processes consist in sequences of reciprocal patterns we must not claim to know their content by referring to a theory of unconscious fantasies as Melanie Klein did. We will, instead, need a theory that relates the internal processes, conceived of as dialogical (or reciprocal) sequences with the structure of utterances

DSA was born in the gradual realization (Leiman, 1998) of the role of Bakhtin's theory of utterance (1984; 1986) in linking external actions with intra psychic processes. The core of the theory is the claim that every utterance expresses the speaker's position, simultaneously, to the referential object of speech and the addressee, i.e., to whom the utterance is meant. This is illustrated by Figure 2 below.

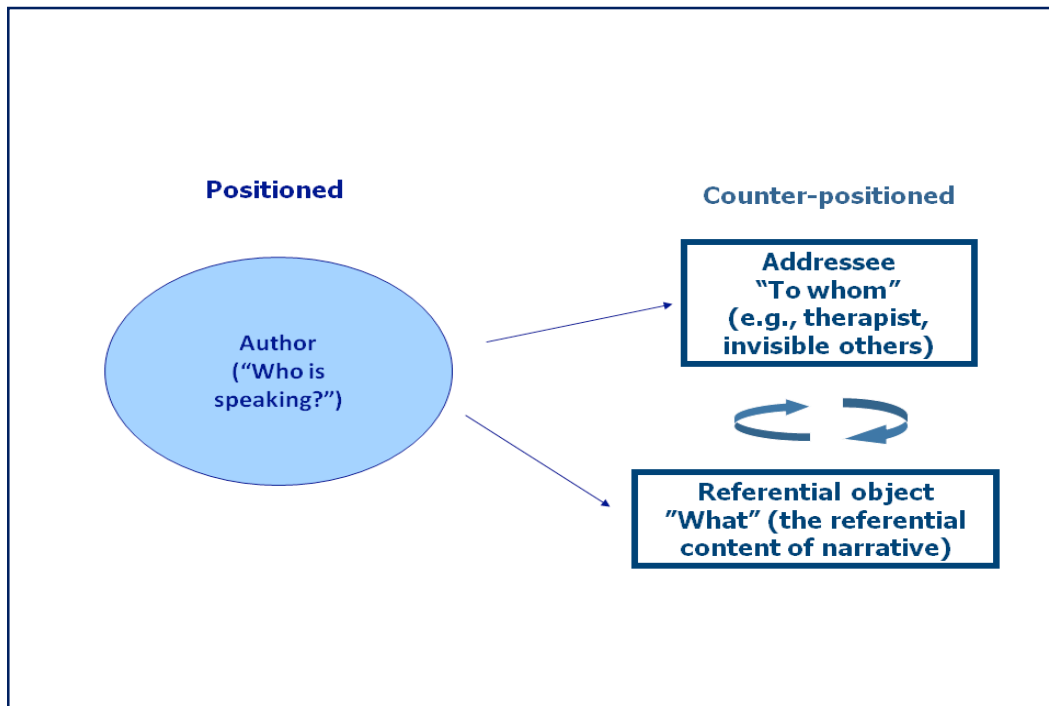


Figure 2. Dual positioning in utterances

The idea of double positioning forms the fundamental rule of the DSA in studying client utterances. Verbal expressions can be regarded as actions that are based on the same general principles, outlined above. Hence, the reciprocal positioning between the author, the referential object and the addressee, and the addressee can be used as clues of related positioning in other spheres of activity, including intra psychic processes. Joined with the third and fourth assumptions, the reciprocal positioning in utterances can be regarded as semiotic expressions of intra psychic subject-object relations. Such an understanding of utterances bridges the dualistic gap between observable behavior and psychic processes.

Semiotic position

Semiotic position is the basic unit of analysis in DSA. Its theoretical grounds are summarized by Bakhtin in the following.

Dialogic relationships are reducible neither to logical relationships nor to object conceptualizations, which as such are devoid of any dialogic moments. They must be fashioned as words, become utterances, become assertions of the positions of various subjects, in order that dialogic relationships might emerge between them. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 183)

Dialogic relationships are absolutely impossible without logical relationships or relationships oriented toward a referential object, but they are not reducible to them and have their own specific character.

As we have already said, logical and semantically referential relationships must be embodied, or personified, that is, they must enter another sphere of being: they must become words, that is, utterances, and receive an author, a creator of the utterance whose position it conveys. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 184).

Bakhtin uses the term semantic instead of semiotic. This modification was originally suggested by John Shotter (1993) in a paper that explored Vygotsky's concept of tool-mediated action in relation to Bakhtin's dialogism.

The expression of a thought or an intention, the saying of a sentence or the doing of a deed, does not issue from already well-formed and orderly cognitions at the center of our being, but originates in a person's vague, diffuse and unordered *feelings* – their sense of how, semiotically, they are 'positioned' in relation to the others around them. (Shotter, 1993, p. 63, italics in the original).

Both quotations are important for DSA. Bakhtin emphasizes the position of the author, or the subject of action in relation to the referential object. Shotter underlines relationships to others as the basis of semiotic positioning. Both aspects are essential in the dynamics of positioning. The difference between the two authors is only apparent. In his conception of double-voiced discourse, or "the word with a sideward glance",

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Bakhtin (1984) demonstrates how the subject's positioning to the referential content of speech is, simultaneously, determined by the anticipated response of the addressee. This dual positioning is the basic structure in semiotic positions.

In a hidden polemic the author's word is directed towards its own referential object, as any words, but now every utterance that refers to the object is constructed in such a way that in addition to its object-directed meaning, a polemical blow is struck at the alien word referring to the theme, at the other's statement of the same object. The word that is directed toward its object collides with another word within the object. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 195)

Hidden polemics is comparable with a rejoinder of every significant and profound dialogue. The words of such a rejoinder are directed at their object and at the same time they react passionately to the alien word, answering to it and anticipating it. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 197)

The speaker's double positioning in any utterance or even in a single word illustrates the complex reciprocity between the speaker, the referential object of speech, and the addressee or recipient of the utterance. When talking about something, for instance, about an event in the past, the composition and choice of words signify our personal position to that event. The presence of other persons modifies this position to the extent that we anticipate their response, i.e. their personal position, to what we are about to express. Hence, any verbal account of our experiences, our memories, dreams, and fantasies, is not a direct expression of our psychic phenomena. The "What" in our utterances is mediated by "To whom" we are speaking.

Real complexity enters the analysis by the qualifying term "semiotic". The author's double positioning is not a "reaction" to two sets of "stimuli", but a historically layered assembly of referential relationships that is condensed in the personal meaning of the position. Bakhtin consistently uses the term "word" to indicate the semiotic nature of positioning. His maxim that "The word, if it is not an acknowledged falsehood, is bottomless" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 127) makes the historicity of sign meanings plain. Bakhtin called it "the microworld of the word" (p, 127).

This poses an arduous challenge for researchers who try to understand what is going on in psychotherapy. In a living dialogue, mutual understanding is created jointly. In the course of therapy, clients express their experiences more openly, therapists learn to know what they mean by their expressions, and misunderstandings can be sorted out in dialogue. The poor researcher is an outsider who can only access an already completed and recorded dialogue. How can we ever be sure that we have reached the true meanings in the semiotic positions that we discover in client and therapist utterances? Obviously we cannot.

This problem has consequences for the reliability and validity of our findings and conclusions. In qualitative research, consensual procedures (Hill, Thomson & Nutt Williams, 1997) have been used to ensure intersubjective coherence of judgments concerning the meaning of client and therapist expressions. Another solution is to rely on dictionary meanings (Mergenthaler, 2008; Salvatore & al., 2010). While this is a straightforward approach that allows the use of computerized analyses, it is not without problems. Voloshinov (1973) pointed out that dictionary meanings only contain the lowest socially shared reference to the object. All the layers of personal meanings that develop through the use of words in communication as well as in instrumental actions and intra psychic dialogue remain inaccessible. The core of psychotherapeutic practice consists in a joint exploration of these historically formed personal meanings and the ways by which they organize the client's psychic processes. There is a wide gap between the dictionary meanings that we use in research and the semiotic positions as they appear in psychotherapy.

Instead of trying to provide a formal definition of a semiotic position, case illustrations may be the best way to articulate the concept. In what follows, I will present three excerpts that show somewhat different aspects of it. The first is an utterance of Miss C, a widely studied case of psychoanalysis.

“And this makes me think of uhm, (stomach rumble) friendships I've had with other people and, something that I don't like to admit because I don't approve of it (chuckle), so I can't imagine anybody else would, but I seem to have to find fault with just about everybody that I'm friendly with to some degree whether it's just a small degree or a larger degree. And, even though in a way I might feel inferior to them, and I imagine I feel inferior to a lot of people, I still have to find fault with them and maybe criticize them to David, I don't know. I always have to openly criticize them, but in any case I have to kind've done that and then I can go on to a re-, a some kind of friendly relationship with them. And until I've done that I can't really accept them as somebody that I want to be at all close to in any way at all.” (Dahl & Teller, 1994, pp. 258-259)

“Being critical to” seems to be the semiotic position that occurs several times in the excerpt. The client adopts this position to herself at the beginning of her utterance. At this stage, the referential object or content is indicated by “it”. She does not approve of “it”. She also puts, in her mind, other people in the critical position. Nobody can approve of what soon will be described as a way of relating to others. The client has to find fault with almost everyone whom she lets close to her. This is the third occurrence of the critical position, now appearing as a direct referential object of speech. The next two occurrences follow immediately. The client has to express her critical stance of others to David who is her partner or, at least, perform it in thought. Whether the position is overtly or covertly adopted is not the salient aspect. What matters most is its

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pervasiveness and force. Until she has been critical, she cannot get close to other people.

The excerpt also suggests that adopting a critical stance is a response to another position that the client seems to experience. She refers to feeling inferior to her friends and emphasizes it by saying that she feels that with a lot of people. Feeling inferior is an obvious reciprocal position, or a counter-position to being critical or disapproving. Assessing herself constantly by a demanding and dissatisfied attitude proves her to be wanting in many respects. This is an intra psychic example of Peter Auriol's *esse apparens*. The position of the perceiver puts the object of perception in a reciprocal counter-position.

My second illustration is an excerpt from Freud's (1916-1917/1963) lectures.

A lady, nearly thirty years of age, who suffered from the most severe obsessional manifestations... She performed (among others) the following remarkable obsessional action many times a day. She ran from her room into another neighbouring one, took up a particular position there beside a table that stood in the middle, rang the bell for her housemaid, sent her on some indifferent errand or let her go without one, and then ran back into her own room. The explanation was reached in the most unequivocal and unobjectionable manner, free from any possible contribution on the doctor's part.... She suddenly knew the answer and told me what it was that was connected with the obsessional action. More than ten years before, she had married a man very much older than herself, and on the wedding-night he was impotent. Many times during the night he had come running from his room into hers to try once more, but every time without success. Next morning he had said angrily: "I should feel ashamed in front of the housemaid when she makes the bed", took up a bottle of red ink that happened to be in the room and poured its contents over the sheet, but not on the exact place where a stain would have been appropriate. I could not understand at first what this recollection had to do with the obsessional action in question... My patient then led me up to the table in the second room and showed me a big stain on the tablecloth. She further explained that she took up her position in relation to the table in such a way that the maid who had been sent for could not fail to see the stain. (Freud, 1916-1917/1963, pp. 261-262).

The excerpt underlines the semiotic nature of positioning. Freud's patient recognized the meaning of her obsessional act while telling about her traumatic wedding night. Later on in the text, Freud suggests that the act might represent the patient's attempts to reposition herself as well as her unfortunate husband in regard to the anticipated derision of the housemaid. Instead of feeling ashamed, the patient repeatedly showed that there was nothing dubious in the stain.

The term “semiotic” indicates here two important aspects of positioning. First, the position assumed by an action or in a verbal utterance always refers to a related position in another area of life or in personal history. Secondly, the explicit form of signs in any position does not have to replicate the original constellation. In the excerpt, the stain in the cloth did in fact resemble the initial situation but it does not have to be so. More often than not, we cannot tell from the manifest appearance of a semiotic position to what it might refer or by which signs the reference is carried out.

The excerpt further illustrates the semiotic nature of the counter-position. The housemaid’s stance was construed by the husband. Why was it important to him to leave a mark of the wedding night? And why did he assume that the housemaid would be condescending or having second thoughts about the sheet? It is likely that his construction had both social and individual underpinnings. We can easily speculate of all the implied meanings that clean sheets might have for all partakers of the event. Semiotic positions always refer to many aspects that are not immediately revealed in the explicit content of the reciprocal patterns. As researchers, we must remember that by performing a third-party reflection of any semiotic material we only have access to the low-level (Voloshinov, 1973) meanings of socially shared signs. The private meanings that any semiotic position contains can only be revealed in the living dialogue of client and therapist. By studying fully recorded psychotherapies we can perceive how such meanings gradually unwrap and take shape. In successful therapies, this gradual disclosure provides the evidence for the semiotic positions that we have identified in the very first expressions of the client.

The third excerpt is brought from Mick Cooper (2004) who used it as an illustration of the client’s emerging observer position aided by the counselor.

Mick: So you’re saying you hate that feeling of tiredness, but tell me more about what goes on for you when you feel it.

Sol: I just get this sense that everything is completely pointless. Like, why should I bother getting up, why should I go to work, what’s the point of it all. It’s just another pointless day: fixing printers, cleaning computer screens, reading the news on the internet... It all seems totally futile. I may just as well stay in bed. And I just hate feeling like that, because it’s so bloody stupid and it’s such a bloody luxury to be able to say that... what about all those people with one arm or who have got Aids in Africa who are so much worse off than me. It’s so self-indulgent. (Cooper, 2004, p. 70).

Sol’s turn is an illustration of a semi-internal dialogue. Although he seems to speak to himself, he responds to Mick’s question. In terms of DSA, the turn represents a double-directed discourse in the sense that Sol’s internal dialogue is addressed to the counselor as much as to himself.

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On the surface level we can recognize two voices. The first announces the futility and pointlessness of everything, while the second responds to this by an admonition. If we stay at this explicit level, there seems to be a dialogue between two I-positions. The first makes a statement that refers to the triviality of “everything” to which the second responds by a rebuke.

In DSA, the internal dialogic structure of both parts in the utterance becomes a salient issue. Each voice entails a reciprocal position between Sol and the referential objects of his speech. Sol’s first voice begins by referring to the “pointlessness of all things, but immediately specifies the referential object, i.e., his work, as something that is utterly meaningless and exasperating. We might formulate the reciprocal pattern by the word-pair “dismissive, exasperated – useless, pointless”. From his defiantly dismissive position Sol construes his work as completely futile. The sensible response to such a counter-position is to stay in bed and avoid another pointless day at work.

The second voice addresses Sol’s dismissive attitude and wish to withdraw, construing it as irresponsible and self-indulgent. Here we have another reciprocal pattern between “judgmental, disapproving – ludicrous, irresponsible”. The voice presumes Sol’s tiredness as the referential object and rebukes it. The judgmental position is, actually, first suggested by the counselor who formulates it in his question to Sol; “You hate that feeling of tiredness”. The tirade that Sol produces as an embodiment of that position.

Sol’s semi-internal dialogue incorporates thus two reciprocal patterns that involve two different referential objects. DSA strives to articulate both patterns, based on the theoretical assumption that the referential object always adopts a counter-position from the standpoint of the acting subject, or is put in the *esse apparence* as Auriol would have had it.

The analysis does not yet end here. Identifying the reciprocal positioning of author and referential objects is only the first step. Complexity is added to the analysis by the fact that all utterances are addressed. They express the person’s experience of something to somebody. This idea is the heart of Bakhtin’s concept of double-voiced speech, or “the word with a sideward glance”.

The counselor, Mick, is the addressee whose presence positions Sol in relation to the flowing content of the two voices. He necessarily hears his own words when letting them out. The counselor’s question puts Sol into a co-observing position, which is the precondition of what Cooper calls self-otherness.

In the passage, the counselor invites Sol to observe what goes on in his mind when he “hates the feeling of tiredness”. By ostensibly disclosing what is going on, Sol, in a way, puts his fate into the counselor’s hands. Some trust must already have been developed in order to be able to adopt such a vulnerable position. Sol’s habitual

response to feeling fed up and lethargic is self-critical and judgmental. He thus has good grounds to assume that the counselor will also be disapproving. By playing out his exasperation Sol takes a risk of getting the same response that he himself produces. His first, defiant and challenging voice is simultaneously addressed to his internal “judge” as well as to the counselor.

In order to fully appreciate the dynamics of the excerpt we will need the meta-model of psychotherapy process as our conceptual aid. Sol’s courage to openly express the tiredness is backed up by the counselor’s invitation to do so, but from an observing stance. This stance is already present in the counselor’s turn, and Sol seems to be able to join it when letting out the internal dialogue. A new reciprocal pattern emerges between the joint observer position and the referential object that the total sequence internal dialogue constitutes.

This repositioning allows further exploration of the meaning or the semiotic content of the tiredness, as illustrated by the immediately following speech turns:

Mick: I get a sense of your anger towards yourself, then, and the feeling like you are really being self-indulgent, but the kinds of questions that you are asking yourself in the mornings don’t seem to me that stupid, they seem like pretty intelligent questions.

Sol: I just don’t feel like I’ve got any right to be feeling sorry for myself... it’s so much worse for other people.

Mick: I know you’re saying that you’re feeling sorry for yourself and I can see that, but that’s not how it sounds to me. It sounds to me like, at those times, you’re wondering about your life and your job and what you’re doing and whether it’s something that is really satisfying for you.

Sol: I guess I’ve never seen it like that. I’ve just seen it as being self-indulgent.

This powerful passage shows how the observer position is sustained by the counselor and how Sol is able to use it. Seen from this position, the referential content of the first voice transforms into a sensible examination of Sol’s current situation at work and his wishes to find some alternatives.

Practice of DSA

DSA is about identifying semiotic positions in client verbal and nonverbal utterances as well as therapist responses, and how they are reciprocally and sequentially organized. Due to its Bakhtinian origins, DSA emphasizes the idea that the meaning of any utterance is deeply historical and context-dependent. Recently, Salvatore & al. (2010) have paid attention to the difficulty that such a semiotic conception entails. “... analysis of semantic content requires a high level of inference. We do not have an

automatic procedure for doing this, and we need intensive labor operations, having to cope with major problems of reliability.” (p. 198).

In doing DSA we must indeed dispense with the classical understanding of reliability as repeatability of observations or identical ways of judgment. Only a relatively low-level domain of lexical meanings can be studied by algorithmic procedures. DSA shares with Conversation Analysis (Streeck, 2008) the procedure of employing data sessions for a detailed observation and analysis of recordings and transcripts.

Instead of attempting to reach identical judgments, the analysis starts by collecting the personal “resonances” of the group members. It is based on the assumption that semiotic positions elicit their reciprocal counter-positions even in people who observe the original processes from outside. Such phenomena are known in the psychodynamic supervision literature as “parallel processes” (Wallerstein, 1958; Lane & al., 1998).

The personal reflections in the data session group are not, however, free-floating or whimsical. They are mediated and disciplined by the theoretical concepts of DSA, or the bipartite theory of psychic phenomena and their manifestation in utterances. DSA is an explicitly theory-driven approach. To recognize and characterize a semiotic position requires a thorough familiarity with the semiotic object relations model (Ryle & Kerr, 2002) and Bakhtin’s theory of utterance (Bakhtin, 1984; 1986) in addition to the general meta-model of psychotherapy process.

Discussion

Concepts carry with them traces of their origins and theories which they try to appropriate into their meaning. Practice, i.e., using the concept as a tool for real actions in the world, should obviously be one aspect in developing the concept. It seems to me that in the present-day psychology theoretical studies and empirical practice evolve partially along different lines.

A powerful example within psychotherapy research is the conceptual competition between *mentalization* and *metacognition* as the key concepts for understanding reflective awareness and client self-reflection. They started from different corners of the playing field. Metacognition (Semerari & al., 2007; Dimaggio & al., 2008) arose from studies of second-level strategies of learning. Mentalization (Fonagy, 1997) was a terminological abbreviation of a developed mode of self-reflection with some references to the Theory of Mind research. Very soon both concepts occupied the area of meanings that had been previously articulated by the Rogerian conception of empathy. It received a specific emphasis on understanding the other’s mental processes in addition to one’s own. At present we are approaching a situation that once prevailed around the concept of projective identification in

psychoanalysis. To get some sense in the over-expanding layers of meaning that the concept was receiving Joseph Sandler wrote his famous article “On communication from patient to analyst: Not everything is projective identification” (Sandler, 1993). Reading a recent book on mentalizing in clinical practice (Allen & al., 2008), makes plain the imminent danger of a complete dilution that this concept seems to be approaching. It may be that meta-cognition will suffer the same fate in due course.

Conceptual fashions seem to come and go. The 1990’s were the prime time for *dialogic* and it did indeed enter almost into every corner of theoretical studies in psychology and social sciences. It began to indicate all kinds of interaction as well as intra psychic processes. Several subgroups of dialogic phenomena were identified, and currently it seems that there are just too many variants of *dialogic* on the scene. Its value is decreasing as is true of any commodity that becomes overproduced and floods the markets.

A shift of interest to the concept of *positioning* seems to be happening since its early introduction by Hollway (1984) as a unit of analyzing ways of articulating oneself in intimate relationships. It entered discourse analysis through the influential work of Davies and Harré (1990) and it is the constitutive term in the concept of I-position in the Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & al., 1992). It has recently been incorporated in the name of a semi-quantitative method of analyzing utterances, partly inspired by the DSA (Cunha, Salgado & Gonçalves, 2012). In order to avoid conceptual confusion, as illustrated by the messy debate around mentalization and meta-cognition, an important task is to examine how these variants of positioning relate to each other and what are their communalities or divergences.

There are two primary strategies to searching for answers. One is to examine how the concept of position functions as a thinking tool in empirical research. The other is a direct comparative analysis within the conceptual domain that the term has recently covered. Empirical comparisons have the advantages of methodological rules while theoretical research still seems to lack a collectively approved discipline to perform conceptual comparisons. There are currently a growing number of methods that employ the concept of position as the unit of observation and analysis. The most promising way of examining their relations is to apply each on a joint case recording. Such an approach will elucidate the aspects of the case that each method enunciates. It is likely that it also articulates the conceptual network that underlies the commonly used term of positioning.

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