

DOING HISTORY BY TELLING STORIES: A DIALOGICAL PROPOSAL

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Abstract. The combination of social representation theory and the dialogical perspective has been pursued as a desirable goal by different scholars. Drawing upon Moreau's (2017) text "Understanding temporalization by the activity of historical thinking," a dialogical perspective is proposed, which assumes the notion of position as the basic unit of analysis. From this standpoint, a position has a triadic structure, in which it is possible to distinguish an agent, audiences and socially represented objects. This creates a double directedness to every deed: a position is always addressed to objects, but also to present or absent audiences. This demands the distinction of two interrelated dimensions: the narrated event and the interactional storytelling event. Besides, a position is always an evaluative stance, which also calls for the consideration of affective and motivational aspects. The complexity of the dialogical relations within a specific position is illustrated with the example of Truman's speech justifying the American military intervention that led to the Korean War

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In recent scholarly discourses, it is the combination of the social representation theory (SRT) and the dialogical perspective that has been highlighted not only as possible, but as a specially promising trend for future advancement of both perspectives. Probably, Marková's (2003) work remains as the most outstanding example of such an attempt. In her original proposal, the human mind is always dependent on a triadic relation between an ego, an *alter*, and an object. Social representations constitute this object, since there is no possibility of relationship between an ego and an *alter* without a socially negotiated and articulated object. In other words, any object appears to our minds as socially embedded, and therefore, is in itself constituted by social representations. Therefore, besides their material properties, all kinds of objects have a social "texture" that mediates our relationship with them and with Others. For example, if I am looking to a red rose, as an Ego I am in relationship with present or absent social Others (*alter*), and this relationship is regulated by social representations (e.g., about red roses, about nature, about love, etc.) constituting the object.

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Moreau's (2017) "[u]nderstanding temporalization by the activity of historical thinking" (p. 161) is another contribution which attempts to pursue a possible combination between these two theoretical trends. This is a challenging piece of work, trying not only to combine these two traditions, but also aiming to contribute to our knowledge about the production of historical thinking. Such complex text is open to a variety of possible lines of enquiry. Leaving behind a great variety of other possibilities, I use it as a way of recalling a specific aspect of the dialogical perspective, namely, the distinction (and interconnectedness) between two functions of narrative building: representation and interaction. Specifically, I use Moreau's (2017) text and historical examples in order to illustrate how we can go further in our dialogical analysis if we pay better attention to the distinction between "narrated event" and the "interactional event" (see, for example, Wortham, 2001).

I will retain from Moreau's (2017) text, the following ideas:

We are dialogical beings, involved in a constant activity of communication and articulation with others.

Social representations are a vital part of that human communication and meaning-making activities.

The dialogical perspective and SRT can be combined in order to sustain a more integrated view about the creation of human knowledge—in this case, on historical thinking.

Some of the cognitive dimensions of meaning-making are well described by dialectical and tensional dynamics involved in the construction of narratives which create specific social representations.

Using these notions as a starting point, my goal is to make it clear that from a dialogical point of view, social representations serve the goal of positioning the agent towards a social background and that this positioning is not necessarily completely revealed by the social representations in themselves. In other words, social representations are used as ways of positioning, but the description of the positioning dynamics involves other elements beyond the cognitive aspect of representations. From a dialogical perspective, the most pressing question is "what is done with these representations."

Social Representations, Narratives, Semiosis and Positioning

Within a dialogical perspective, the basic unit of analysis is the position that an agent is assuming towards an object (Hermans, 2001; Leiman, 2011, 2012; Salgado, Cunha, & Bento, 2013; Salgado & Valsiner, 2010). Hermans' work coined the term *I*-position to refer to this basic element when we are talking about a subjective personal position, but the notion of position can be used in a broader sense in order to refer to the

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specific perspective and action assumed by groups, and communities. By saying that position is the basic unit of analysis, I am not implying that this unit cannot be divided in different elements. Actually, this notion involves a complex set of inter-related elements that are brought together: a position involves necessarily an agent, an object, and audiences, which may be physically present or absent. Thus, a position can be seen as the active perspective towards something which takes place within a social background. By using the term “active perspective,” I am willing to combine two elements that come together: on the one hand, we have the specific cognitive arrangement or “the view” about a particular object or situation; on the other hand we have the evaluative, affective, and active operation upon that object. This particular evaluation is also a response to other specific views brought by explicit or implicit social Others, who constitute the social background of the situation. In other words, by assuming a perspective about something we are acting upon something (and this makes the dialogical self theory (DST) amenable to constructivism, at least in the Piagetian sense).

Therefore, I may say that the notion of position is better depicted by the following diagram (Fig. 1), largely borrowed from Karl Bühler (1990, also see Salgado & Valsiner, 2010), which shows its triadic nature.

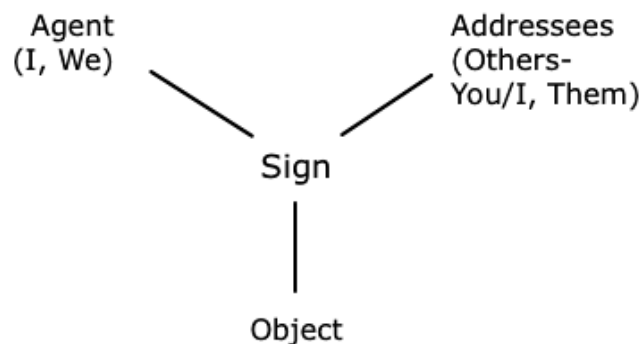


Figure 1. The Triadic Structure of a Dialogical Position (inspired by Bühler, 1990).

The relation between signs, social representations, and narratives is somehow complex, since these terms refer to overlapping features of the process. Nevertheless, in order to maintain some clarity, and taking the risk of some oversimplification, I assume that social representations are specific semiotic combinations, which may take the form of a narrative (for a more thorough analysis of these concepts and their relation, see, for example, Zittoun, Valsiner, Vedeler, Salgado, Gonçalves, & Ferring, 2013). Therefore, whenever some social agent is assuming a position, I witness what may be called, in a Bakhtinian perspective (Bakhtin, 1984), “double directedness”: the position is directed to the object, but it is also directed to particular audiences.

Moreover, this process is not only “rational” or purely cognitive. It demands, of course, some cognitive operations, since it implies particular understandings of the situation at stake. However, it also involves an affective evaluative stance towards something, which in itself is already a sort of action upon the object. Therefore, there is an affective and motivational stance assumed. However, this stance is not necessarily the same as the explicit verbal productions of the agent. For example, I may be attracted to something and may be saying quite the opposite. This evaluative and active side of a position is probably the most central aspect for a dialogical analysis: as it was previously argued, the most striking question for a dialogical perspective is not specifically “how is this object represented,” but what are the agents doing or intending to do with their social and semiotic representations.

Narratives, History and Positioning

From this standpoint, I would say that Moreau’s (2017) work is, somehow, more devoted to the complex dialectical games and processes of semiotic mediation involved in the cognitive apprehension of historical events than to the full dialogical dynamics involved. I am aware, however, that this claim is not completely adequate, since the text also makes the bridge with some dialogical notions. Nevertheless, since some dialogical aspects are not fully captured in that piece of work, I would like to complement his analysis with some other elements.

I need to return to the double directedness of semiotic positions described in the last section. Using a different terminology, Stanton Wortham depicted this feature of narrative-making some years ago in his distinction (borrowed from Roman Jakobson) between the narrated event and the storytelling interactional event: while telling a story (narrated event), the agent is assuming a particular interactional position towards specific audiences (interactional event). Therefore, we have the event being described (the narrated event), but we also have the interactional event (what is the agent doing to the relevant audiences involved). Wortham (2001), for example, reminds the interactional function of the expression “collateral damages” used to report deaths of non-combatants to the media. By anticipating the future critical voices about those deaths, these are euphemistically described as “collateral damages,” with the intention of minimizing expected criticisms, and making those military actions more acceptable to the general public.

Applying the same kind of reasoning, this kind of analysis may also be useful to the purposes pursued by Moreau’s (2017) article in terms of teaching and learning of history. Coming back to his example about the change of the American policy regarding Korea that ended up with the American involvement in the Korean War, his analysis reveals that the analogy between the situation in Korea and the “lessons of the 1930s” (Manchuria, Ethiopia and Austria) was a main source of justification for the American

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intervention. Later, he assumes that these analogies were, like most of analogies, probably only partially adequate to the Korean context at that time.

What I want to add to this analysis is the following: departing from the dialogical point of view previously described, the most important issue about social representations is what the agent is intending to do with those social representations. Thus, I may ask: what for is this story being told? It is clear in Moreau's (2017) article that Truman was using a very compelling argument to the Americans at that time, as the Neustadt and May's (1988) quotation makes it clear:

When explaining to Congress why he had decided to send in American troops, Truman spoke of the "fateful events of the nineteen-thirties, when aggression unopposed bred more aggression and eventually war." And this was—then—not such ritual phraseology as by the time of Kennedy's speech on the missile crisis. Truman was stating an analogy with irresistible force for almost all Americans of that time (p. 36).

Therefore, Truman was very successful in his endeavour of justifying the necessity of military action—he was making use of an "irresistible force," persuading the Americans, but also the Western allies, that this intervention was highly needed.

According to some historical analysis, this was actually a major driving force for the American intervention. Truman was in the need of sending such a message if he wanted to maintain his domestic reputation, as well as the western allies on his side (Craig & Logevall, 2009). It is quite common in the historical analysis of the Korean War to assume that the most important motive behind the intervention was the fear of the "communist threat" to the American position in the world. To understand these claims, it is important to recall the significant events that took place in 1949 (see Halberstam, 2007). Actually, in terms of foreign policy the invasion of the South by the North Korea was the third major and highly negative event to the American administration in 1949: Soviet Union did its first nuclear test and the Maoist forces won the civil war in China. Thus, the American administration was under high pressure, and its domestic and external prestige was at stake (Craig & Logevall, 2009). Thus, there was another and maybe even higher motivation behind the change in the American position: to demonstrate to the Americans and to the Western allies that USA would pursue their defence at a worldwide scale. Thus, the fear of the "communist threat" also played a key role in this historical decision.

Therefore, I am assuming here that this military action was also decided out of fear of losing power. Even if possibly playing an important role for the Truman administration reading of Korean events, the analogy was a compelling rhetorical device in order to mobilize political and public support to the subsequent military action, one that would be more sympathetic to the audience than merely assuming that US wanted to maintain a dominant position in the world.

In sum, these events strongly remind me that the most important thing about words and representations is what we do and what we intend to do with them, which involve motivations and audiences. In a sense, this comes closer to Moreau's (2017) use of social representations as semiotic tools in order to operate in the world. However, what I want to add that we need to distinguish between the narrated event and the interactional event. Truman was not only addressing the situation in Korea with an analogy; he was also addressing different social audiences with different goals: addressing the "friendly" audiences, with the purpose of obtaining social support for the subsequent action, as well as addressing the "communist countries" that were felt as threatening Others, sending them a message of power and strength. Therefore, the specific construction of the historical narrative in his speech was heavily constrained by those important sources of motivation. At the same, he was doing history, while telling a story (making the analogy). While telling the story and doing history remain bound together, they are also distinct.

Conclusion

There is a famous passage in a John Lennon's song in which he sings "Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans" (apparently derived from a saying originally from Allen Saunders and published *in 1957 in Reader's Digest magazine*), and it can be used to illustrate the distinction between the narrated event and the interactional event that happens whenever we tell a story. In this article, I used it as a way of distinguishing these two levels of events during the production of historical narratives. Truman's historical analogy between Korea and other historical events is, in itself, a narrative production that brings together different historical moments, anticipates and dramatizes the immediate future, and therefore legitimizes the American intervention. At the same time, a very complex set of other forces also operate that can only be discovered by exploring the different audiences that lie in the other end of this story.

I believe that this just an example of what happens in our everyday lives: doing history by telling stories, based on strong affective roots. Therefore, this may and should be extended to other kinds of analysis—and not only the narrative telling within the making of history. Actually, only by paying attention to these two complementary levels of analysis—the content of our semiotic productions, and the interactional positioning they produce—we may understand these events in a full dialogical perspective. The dynamism of the triadic structure of agent-audiences-represented object will be key aspects in such kind of analysis.

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