

***CULTURAL PROCESSES WITHIN DIALOGICAL SELF THEORY:  
A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF COLLECTIVE VOICES  
AND SOCIAL LANGUAGE***

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**ABSTRACT.** The aim of this article is to highlight socio-cultural premises within dialogical self theory and to further underline these with a dynamic constitutive approach to language and a socio-cultural sphere. Discussing a dialogical self from these perspectives emphasises both the constitutive and the mediational aspects of cultural processes within person's interactions. The purpose of outlining a dynamic constitutive approach in relation to a socio-cultural sphere, in which dialogical interactions take place, is to contribute to further clarifying and thereby advancing the understanding of the culture-person relationship within dialogical self theory. For this purpose the relations of collective voices, social language and culture within dialogical self theory are analyzed within dialogical self literature with some references to Bakhtin. These conceptions are then related to language as dynamically co-constituting person's interaction via cultural mediation and to the notion of resonating within a socio-cultural sphere. In this sense culture is discussed as bi-directional structural processes that dynamically co-constitute individual actions as well as the socio-cultural sphere. Important consequences of such an approach—all personal positions and voices necessarily being culturally mediated through their interactions—are discussed with some implications for future research in the later part of this article.

**KEYWORDS:** Dialogical self theory, collective voices, social language, dynamic constitution, socio-cultural sphere, cultural mediation

Bakhtin's conception of dialogicality serves as one of the main steppingstones (next to James's classic works on the self) for the formulation of the dialogical self theory (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992; for further dialogical self developments see also e.g. Lyra, 1999; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004; Valsiner, 2002; Saldago & Goncalves, 2007; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). While it has been argued that dialogical approaches are dependent on language or symbolic systems (e.g. Markova & Foppa, 1990), the perception of language guaranteeing the centrality of the relationship between psychological processes and socio-cultural settings (Wertsch, 1991) is often only referred to without further elaboration (e.g. Lyra, 2007). Thus, the aim of this paper is to trace the relation of language and culture within dialogical self theory and,

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by doing so, to underline the importance of understanding the person-culture relationship as a dynamic constitution (Slunecko, 2008). Highlighting the dynamic constitutive nature of self and culture within dialogical self theory serves the purpose of emphasizing one of the theories main aspirations: overcoming individualistic and reified views of culture and persons (Hermans et al., 1992).

As the aim of this paper is to highlight the socio-cultural nature of culture and self within dialogical self theory, the first step will be to discuss the premises of such an approach to culture, which describes culture as being manifested within and mediating the person-environment interaction (Valsiner, 2007). To exemplify this approach more clearly the discussion then turns to language as an example of cultural tools within a socio-cultural environment. More precisely, language—as cultural mediational tool—will be discussed as fundamentally co-constituting psychological and societal processes in various distinct manners. On the one hand the very genesis of psychological processes is guided partially by the specific symbolic system a person uses (Vygotsky, 1929/1994; Boesch, 2000). On the other hand, language is discussed as providing a protective linguistic atmosphere in which one moves and interacts according to patterns that vary depending on the specific linguistic systems in which persons move and interact (Slunecko, 2008; Slunecko & Hengl, 2006, 2007). The socio-cultural space, which encompasses the specific linguistic atmospheres, is inspired by Sloterdijk's (1998, 1999, 2004) conception of spheres. Once this dynamic constitutive approach to culture is sufficiently laid out, a closer look at the notion of culture within dialogical self theory—particularly culture as social position, collective voices and social language—will help further develop current understandings of culture and some underlying premises within dialogical self research.

Within the conclusion some theoretical implications from a socio-cultural perspective will briefly be discussed in relation to future empirical dialogical self research. Here too the aim is to explicitly highlight the dynamic mediating and co-constituting characteristics of cultural mediation in order to further move away from implicit individualistic and reified assumption of culture. In order to discuss some implications of a dynamic and mediational approach to culture the following paragraphs are dedicated to outlining this approach.

### **Culture**

Culture and grasping its meaning in relation to the person has a long history in social thought (see Jahoda, 1993 for an overview). Giving a full account of all the attempts dealing with the culture-person relationship would not only be impossible within this framework, it would also be fruitless, as the goal here is to shed some light onto the current understanding of culture within dialogical self theory, and not to give an overview of previous accounts established within the social sciences. It is however

important to keep in mind that this discussion is not a new one and that we thus can resort to already established scientific formulations to further develop a solid understanding of person-culture relations within current theories. In this respect Valsiner (2007) has differentiated three main understandings of culture, which are useful to keep in mind while discussing the person-culture relations within dialogical theory. The three main meanings which have been used over the years within psychology are as follows:

1. Culture has been used to designate some group of people who “belong together” by value of some shared features. Here individual persons “belong to” a specific culture.
2. Culture can be seen as systemic organizer of the psychological system of the individual person—culture “belongs to” the person and is part of the self, organizing it in ways that are functional for personal life.
3. Culture “belongs to” how the person and the environment are interrelated. The meaning of “belong to” here breaks down—there is no specific “owner” (or “carrier”) of culture. Instead culture becomes exemplified through different processes by which persons interact with their worlds. (p. 21)

If one were to escape the traditional individualistic approach to self, as Hermans and colleagues propose to do (e.g. Hermans et al., 1992; Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), the first step is to disregard culture or the person as reified entity or as something that belongs to one or the other. Viewing the definitions above, only the last definition is fully exempt of any reification as culture is seen as a process—as construction of conceptual structures by activities of persons—or, as a semiotic mediation (Valsiner, 2007). Focusing on the emergence of phenomena resulting from person-environment interactions allows for an approach that does not begin with the individual person as a Cartesian perspective usually does. Rather, it situates the person as starting premise within a social realm of happenings and emphasises the emerging cultural tools, which simultaneously guide and constrain all interactions taking place within the socio-cultural sphere (which necessarily includes inter-individual processes as well as intra-individual psychological processes). Culture can thus be understood on the one hand as organizing principle of human action (Valsiner, 2007), and on the other hand as structuring and patterning the human sphere (Sloterdijk, 1998, 2004). Furthermore, culture should be understood as dynamic constitutive of what it means to be a person in the first place (Slunecko, 2008; Slunecko & Hengl, 2006, 2007).<sup>1</sup> How exactly cultural structuring and patterning of the human

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<sup>1</sup> Note that while it would be possible to make a heuristic distinction between the actual mediational processes and the constitutive role, I would like to caution the reader to do so. Mediational processes are described here as *inherently* constitutive to psychological mechanisms and vice versa. It is precisely through the mediation that cultural processes co-constitute psychological mechanisms. I fear that drawing

sphere as well as psychological processes functions is described in the following paragraphs with the example of language.

### **Language as Access Portal**

Language, Sluneco (2008) suggests, is the access portal to both psychological and societal processes. Language itself is not simply the carrier of information that leaves either the sender or the environment and the receiver unchanged. Rather, through language the psychological system takes on societal forms while at the same time the societal processes, via language, take on structures and forms of psychological nature. The following two examples explicate what is meant by psychological and societal processes intermingle within the realm of language and how one takes on specific characteristics of the other.

#### *Two Examples*

Boesch (2000) discussed the importance of the meaning of rhythms and sounds over the actual information being transmitted in lullabies and little children's rhymes. In these examples it is easily imaginable how the same meaning could be transmitted to the child via other sentence structures or words that do not rhyme and follow certain patterns, being half as effective. Or how the actual meaning might not be soothing at all, were the child to understand and grasp the meaning of what was being recited and not perceive the lullaby as something soothing, something that bonded it to its caregiver. A prominent example is the well known lullaby *Rock-a-bye Baby*.<sup>2</sup> Here the actual information of the lullaby may be quite disturbing if one imagines a baby falling out of a treetop, and yet it is one of the more popular nursery rhymes used to sooth babies. Boesch (2000) thus argues that language in such cases takes on a bonding and soothing function. The psychological process of bonding and soothing thus becomes apparent within the social contact, the social process of speech and within the realm of language.

While Boesch's (2000) example shows that language can take on psychologically soothing forms and thereby structure the social act of the infant-

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a differentiation between these two interrelated concepts (the mediational and the constitutive aspect)—even only a heuristic one—might lead the reader to understand the mediational processes and the constitutive role as intrinsically distinct. Yet, this is precisely the fallacy I would like to surpass in this paper. Thus, while a heuristic differentiation may be helpful in further differentiation single mechanisms and thereby advancing theoretical developments, it is not discussed here as an in-depth discussion necessary for this topic is beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, it is precisely this differentiation which has lead many scholars in the past to solely focus on only one aspect (e.g. the mediational role) without discussing the other (e.g. the constitutive role) which again leads to a false assumption of both being distinct and as such also not worthy of investigating together, as intrinsically interrelated. The very purpose of this paper is to show their interrelatedness and not their distinct features.

<sup>2</sup> Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetop, when the wind blows, the cradle will rock, when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, cradle and all.

caregiver interaction, Klein (1994) exemplifies how language takes on societal structures, which then organize the psychological process of perception when describing space. According to Klein's observations the Guughu Yimidher in Australia do not use the left-right differentiation in their description of space. Instead of perceiving the space around them in terms of the commonly used bodily asymmetrical proportions, which left and right are built upon, the Guughu Yimidher use an absolute systems. This absence of the descriptive terms of left and right points to the notion that the space in which selves form is not a universal fact which simply needs to be translated into any language. Rather, it suggests that the space itself already underlies cultural structures which have emerged out of, and continue to change during particular ways of being together.

Discussing how social interactions, and particularly speech and language, mediate psychological processes such as perception from a developmental perspective, Vygotsky (1978) argued that with the

means of words children single out separate elements, thereby overcoming the natural structure of the sensory field and forming new (artificially introduced and dynamic) structural centers. The child begins to perceive the world not only through his eyes but also through his speech. (p. 32)

And Vygotsky (1994) reminds us, that “in the language of many primitive races there is no such word as ‘tree’; they have only separate words for each kind of tree” (p. 59), implying that with the development of language the child perceives the world according to specific conceptual categories present within language. Thus, if the person grows up within a linguistic atmosphere which does not use categories of trees in general, he or she will not view different trees as belonging to the same category, but rather perceive various single trees and distinguish them according to their unique properties, e.g. a lime tree.

*Societal and Psychological Structures within Language*

By looking at the language structures we can thus on the one hand find some distinctive psychological features (e.g. the soothing and bonding functions of lullabies, Boesch, 2000) as well as social and societal structures that are then reflected within the individual perception (e.g. the spatial descriptions with or without the distinctions of left and right, Klein, 1994 or concept development as described by Vygotsky, 1929/1994).

At this point it is important to note that the term structure here should not be understood as a static world view that is then simply internalized as “an outward, ready-made creation” (Vygotsky, 1929/1994, p. 62). Rather, Vygotsky points out, that after the structure comes into being, it is “subject to a lengthy internal change which shows all the signs of development” (p. 62). In this sense language constantly forces open the functioning-circle—the psychological and societal processes—while simultaneously

constituting it in a dynamic form. The person in turn is constituted by all of his or her cultural practices through medial and symbolic applications, just as cultural and societal practices are constituted by personal actions. Tracing this aspect back to the co-evolutionary development of the various systems, language is a key component in which both systems, the psychological and the social, become accessible (Slunecko, 2008).

Being able to access the underlying cultural structures of the space in which we move and develop or the psychological structures within language does not, however, imply that language is simply the means with which societal structures are translated into psychological processes or vice versa. Quite the contrary is the case. From Wertsch (1985) we learn that Vygotsky has already made this argument when discussing the characteristics of cultural tools such as language. According to Wertsch (1985) Vygotsky emphasized that cultural tools do not “simply facilitate an existing mental function while leaving it qualitatively unaltered. Rather, the emphasis is on their capacity to transform mental functioning” (p. 79).

While Vygotsky focused mostly on the development of mental functions, the capacity of language to transform social interactions, societal processes and the socio-cultural sphere in general should not be dismissed. Rather, language should always be understood as dynamically constituting both the psychological and the societal processes simultaneously. Such a bi-directional model explicitly rejects the notion of the individual person being solely determined by cultural structures. As psychological functions are shaped and shaded by cultural processes, so are social interactions and indeed the cultural processes themselves changed by individual actions. In this sense a person’s individual development will always be co-constituted (as opposed to determined) by specific cultural structures. The special perception of e.g. an Australian child belonging to the Guughu Yimidher will develop very differently from a middle European one. Of course both children will develop some sense for their surroundings. But the exact descriptions of this space will vary according to certain cultural tools the child uses (e.g. language). Likewise, societal change, as subtle as it may be, continuously occurs during the interactions of persons. While some societal change occurs wilfully by the hand of a particular person or group of persons (e.g. during a revolution), most societal changes occur through everyday mundane interactions and go unnoticed (e.g. linguistic changes may begin with subtle changes of different intonations of specific words and gradually move into more distinct forms of dialects).

Thus, as language may provide us with certain structures as to how to perceive the space around us and thereby structure our psychological mechanisms in a very particular manner, it furthermore providing us with a home, a protective and imaginative atmosphere, maintaining and expanding our life-worlds. These imaginative atmospheres are seen as a kind of semantic vital coating, which necessarily emerge within any human collective (Slunecko & Hengl, 2007). Mannheim (1922-24/1980)

argues that without language a permanent relation between persons occupying the same conjunctive experiential space would be rather difficult. Thus, language is argued to be a necessary element of how persons function at any given moment in their history.

*Transcending Linguistic Relativism*

To differentiate between a dynamic constitutive approach from a linguistic relativistic one such as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,” it is interesting to note that in 1943 Whorf has already postulated that language represents a house of consciousness:

And every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomenon, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness. (1942/1956, p. 252; cited in Valsiner, 1998, p. 275)

Slunecko and Hengl (2007) themselves too refer to one of the core ideas presented by Whorf by pointing out that “conceptual categorizations of reality are, at least partially, determined by the structure of language” (p. 42). While Slunecko and Hengl did not enter the discussion of how deterministic versus relativistic their interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is, the pivotal difference of Whorf’s emphasis on language structuring psychological thought processes and the approach sought for here is that language does not imprison human action and should not be seen as a unidirectional cultural force. In this respect, citing Valsiner (1998), language is assumed to be “an open-ended generative enterprise where we introduce subtle novelty into the very instrument that we use in that process” (p. 276).

Thus, while language itself remains open for change, and indeed continuously does so, it nevertheless also co-constitutes psychological mechanisms and societal processes to some degree. The two examples of space conceptualization and the use of lullabies were chosen to demonstrate these two aspects of language and to show how both societal and psychological processes dynamically constitute each other through the use of cultural tools. Yet, the subtlety of cultural processes guiding and constraining psychological mechanisms (and vice versa) is usually not obviously noticeable and is therefore better described with the notion of an implicit self-generating protective atmosphere. The notion of a “home-atmosphere” is thus related to the idea of a socio-cultural (atmo)sphere and further elaborated in the following paragraphs.

**Of Spheres and Self-generating Atmospheres**

Inspired by Sloterdijk’s (1998, 1999, 2004) notion of spheres, the socio-cultural sphere is understood as an orb that is filled with sense, meaning and with all that lives

and is protected.<sup>3</sup> It should be conceptualised as an *eigenspace* with atmosphere generating qualities which emerge through being together in resonance. Through the tensions, inspirations, and the taking part in the socio-cultural sphere we are always a floating pole in sympathy-spaces, in mood-spaces, and in taking-part-spaces.

The focus here lies on the very subtle patterns and structures which are part of the human experience of belonging to a socio-cultural sphere. Because of their subtlety they are usually not noticed and seldom addressed. Within the socio-cultural atmosphere, the inhabitants always experience the world from a certain perspective and never directly. A certain understanding of what it means to be part of the socio-cultural sphere is experienced through the simple act of resonating together in a conjunctive experiential space (Mannheim, 1922-1924/1980). Sloterdijk (1998) describes this experience as *floating* within the sphere.<sup>4</sup>

### *Floating Beings*

To clarify the experience of being part of a human sphere, Sloterdijk (1998) describes the human being as *floating being* (“Schwebewesen”). Here the term floating means being dependent upon shared atmospheres or moods (“Stimmungen”) and collective assumptions (“Annahmen”). The individual is seen as an effect of the inspired or enlivened (“beseelte”) space<sup>5</sup> which lies between the individual and the other. This space is the medium in which our reality forms itself. As it is the space that is highlighted in Sloterdijk’s conceptions, it is never the isolated entities or objects that seem to be of importance, but rather the patterns and structures of the interactional relationship in our intentional worlds (Schweder, 1990). It is what is happening between individuals, their dynamically constituting cultural processes, that always also shape human action and therefore also the self.

As such culture is seen as on the one hand emerging through human interaction and on the other hand simultaneously structuring personal action. This understanding of culture is not new to authors of dialogical self theory as e.g. Hermans and Kempen have already referred to Wertsch’s formulation of cultural tools in 1995 where they identify mediated action as the basic unit of analysis and discuss its dialogical nature.

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<sup>3</sup> Here the notion of “all that is protected” can be compared to Boesch’s (2000) description of all that is safe and familiar within the *potential action field* or “Handlungsbereich.”

<sup>4</sup> See Sloterdijk (1998) pp. 17-82, particularly pp. 45-46.

<sup>5</sup> Sloterdijk’s work on spheres has not been published in English yet (the first volume of his spherology, *Bubbles: Spheres Volume I: Microspherology*, is due to be released in December, 2011). Here the translation seems especially difficult as the German term *beseelt* can take on various meanings. The term *beseelt* comes from the term *Seele*, which can be translated as soul, psyche, mind or spirit. *Beseelt* could thus be translated as ensouled, animated, or as prompted with an idea, a notion. As Sloterdijk (1998, pp.17-) begins his descriptions of spheres with the notion of life being breathed into a vessel, I have chosen the word inspired as this word also captures the notion of wind being blown into something. Yet, it is important to keep the other translations in mind.



Nevertheless the dialogical self has not been further elaborated in terms of being situated within a socio-cultural sphere. More importantly, while culture has been discussed by Hermans and Kempen in 1995 as mediating action, the implication of such an action-based conception of culture is not always adhered to within empirical research. This matter is further discussed in the following paragraphs, in which we will now turn to dialogical self theory and to some cultural considerations within it.

### **The Dialogical Self as Culture-inclusive**

In 2001, Hermans elaborates the idea of the dialogical self as ‘culture-inclusive’ with particular emphasis on embodied forms of dialogue, collective voices and asymmetrical social relations. As the scope of this paper does not allow for a full reflection on all three arguments (let alone all considerations of culture within dialogical self literature), I will solely refer to collective voices and related functional terms: social language, social positions and ventriloquation.

#### *Collective Voices, Social Language and Ventriloquation*

*Collective voices.* Within dialogical self theory culture is described in part as structures and processes belonging to the self-system in terms of collective voices employing social languages via *ventriloquation* (Hermans, 2001). A distinction between personal and collective voices, which respectively correspond to social and personal positions, is made. Here Hermans describes social positions as “governed and organized by societal definitions, expectations and prescriptions, whereas personal positions receive their form from the particular ways in which individual people organize their own lives” (p. 263). The notion of a collective voice is further describe as the voice of a cultural group, of the collective to which one belongs.

*Social language.* Social language is described as a “discourse particular to a specific stratum of society ... within a given social system at a given time” (Hermans & Kempen, 1995, p. 107). As examples the authors list social dialects, linguistic behavioural characteristics of particular groups, professional jargons, language of generation and age groups, and other such categories. Social languages are found within a single national language (e.g. German, Russian, English, etc.) and among different national languages within the same culture.

*Ventriloquation.* The term ventriloquation signifies the simultaneity of two voices speaking at once. Hermans (2001) resorts to Bakhtin’s conceptualization of vantriloquation to explain that social languages “shape what individual voices can say” by one voice “speaking through another voice or voice type” (p. 262). Thus, the multivoicedness of the dialogical self not only refers to the “simultaneous existence of different individual voices, but also to the simultaneous existence of an individual voice and the voice of a group” (p. 262).

Accordingly, culture is incorporated *into* the self-system as a collective voice speaking with social language from a social position. But how exactly do voices function in relation to culture and positions? When does a collective voice speak? What is the differentiation between a personal and a social position from which a collective voice speaks? In 1996 Hermans describes the notion of voice and position in spatial terms. Accordingly “[v]oice assumes an embodied actor located in space together with other actors who are involved in coordinated ... action” (p.44). And “a position is always located in relation or in opposition to other positions and is thus suited as a relational concept that allows the relative autonomy of personal positioning” (p.44). Furthermore, in 2001 he discusses the relation between personal and collective voices with reference to empirical evidence, which also suggests, that both voices “function as relatively autonomous parts of the self” (p. 262).

Dialogical self scholars do not anywhere explicitly state that social positions and collective voices are necessarily and always, by their nature, completely separate from personal positions and voices. In fact, the oppositional and relational characteristic of both social and personal positions and collective and personal voices are emphasized with the very notion of dialogicality. A personal position always functions in opposition to a social position and a collective voice always speaks through a personal voice. And yet, the fact that collective voices *always* speak through personal voices whenever an utterance is produced is not clearly emphasized. Thus, the exact relationship of cultural processes and psychological ones remains opaque. The main concern in this regard is whether collective voices speak over personal voices via ventriloquation—shaping what individuals can say—or whether a collective voice is in dialogical relation with other personal voices—influencing the whole structure of the positions repertoire by power relations. A third possibility (which will be argued for here) is that a collective voice always speaks through a personal voice while thereby being simultaneously in opposition to and in dialogue with other voices.

The first two possibilities—speaking through personal voices *or* being in dialogical relation with other personal voices—both seem to suggest that collective voices eventually represent singular positions within the self-system, also if these positions may take a ‘we-like’ quality (Hermans, 2003, p. 105). The reduction of collective voices to singular positions is particularly questionable in relation to culture as this reduction would suggest a reification of cultural processes. Yet, here too cultural processes and how these function in relation to voices, positions and the whole self-system is not emphasized or explicitly elaborated. In 2003 for example Hermans states that:

Cultures can be seen as collective voices which function as social positions in the self. Such positions or voices are expressions of historically situated selves that are, particularly on the interface of cultures, constantly involved in dialogical relationships with other voices. (p. 96)

Here we can infer that cultural processes function within the self-system as collective voices as described within the third possibility. A collective voice always speaks over a personal voice with the use of social language and as such is in dialogical relation with other personal voices. Conceiving culture as collective voices that speak over personal voices does not in itself reduce cultural processes to a singular position within the self-system. This point will be further elaborated upon with reference to Bakhtin (1986/2003) in the following sections of this paper. From this perspective dialogical self theory is compatible with a dynamic constitutive approach to culture.

The problem of accounting for cultural mediation within a dialogical self arises when a direct transference of ‘culture’ to a collective voice and then to a social position is assumed without stressing the dynamic and mediational processes that are characteristic of culture. It is in this case only a question of emphasis. When emphasis is placed on social positions (as a rather static *entity*) rather than for e.g. on social language (as a cultural tool used within the process of dialogical *interaction*), culture is usually discussed in terms of singular cultural I-position: e.g. the ‘Arabic culture’ might be represented within the self-system as an Arabic I-position while another position, e.g. the German I-position, might represent ‘the German culture’ and so forth. Yet, as will be argued with Bakhtin’s (1986/2003) differentiation of single speech events and speech event types in the following paragraphs, focusing on language and its bi-directional mediational characteristic surpasses a reified and individualistic approach to culture by emphasising the dynamic constitutive characteristic as a socio-cultural perspective does. Thus I-positions and their voices are not cultural because they possess a collective *voice*. Instead, I-positions are cultural because they are culturally mediated by their dialogical *interactions*. It is the process of dialogically interacting which culturally mediates the I-position.

*Individual Voices, Social Language and Culture: Referring Back to Bakhtin*

Bakhtin’s (1986/2003) differentiation between single speech events (individual utterances produced by unique voices) and types of speech events or particular speech genres (types of utterances produced by types of voices), which Hermans (e.g. 2001, p. 262) includes in his description of ventriloquation (see above), is an important one in depicting collective voices as access portal to both psychological processes and cultural ones. Note the differentiation between *individual voices* on the one hand and *voice types* on the other hand. The individual voice and the voice type represent two sides of the same coin: both are always present when individual utterances are produced. In this sense Bakhtin (1981/2003) states that “[e]very utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ ... and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia” (p. 75).

With social heteroglossia Bakhtin (1986/2003) described the individual utterance as being able to exist only within a particular sphere of communication.

Furthermore, speech genres impose their own restrictions and structures upon the individual speakers and usually go unnoticed:

We speak only in definite speech genres, that is, all our utterances have definite and relatively stable typical *forms of construction of the whole*. Our repertoire of oral (and written) speech genres is rich. We use them confidently and skilfully *in practice*, and it is quite possible for us not even to suspect their existence *in theory*. (emphasis in the original, p. 83)

Returning to dialogical self theory we can thus infer that the conception of social language in relation to individual voices applies to *all* voices. All voices are already shaped by particular speech genres that have evolved over time in particular communicative spheres. Note that when individual voices produce singular utterances, they *always* do so through particular voice types and speech genres which are just as value laden and structured in a very particular manner as language is always ideologically saturated and represents a particular world view (Bakhtin, 1981/2003).

Here too, as with Vygotsky (1929/1994), the simultaneity of the social and the psychological processes are highlighted. While Vygotsky (1929/1994) talked about the social processes being internalized and thereby structuring intra-individual psychological processes, Bakhtin (1982/2003) talks of particular social forms of speech that are always found within the personal utterance. Furthermore, both scholars point to the dynamic and bi-directionality of the two-folded characteristic of language and point out that language is not to be understood as a ready-made creation that is simply internalized without further development on either social or individual side. Both the individual and the social change and further develop through the use of language. In fact, to use Slunecko's (2008) terminology, both the social and the psychological facets of language, speech and utterances dynamically constitute one another and continuously change the form and structure of both.

Thus, when Hermans (2003) (or any other dialogical self scholar) talks of culture as collective voice that speaks over a personal voice, it is important to keep in mind that this collective voice always speaks through personal voices as the very nature of language entails both the social and the psychological processes. Therefore, when culture is discussed within the dialogical self-system, the focus should not lie on the social positions from which collective voices speak (as for example 'the German I-position'), but rather on the constraining and guiding principles of such cultural tools such as language, which dynamically constitute both individual actions as well as societal structures within the socio-cultural sphere. The following paragraphs elaborate both the implication of cultural tools mediating all personal interactions (including the production of utterances) as well as the notion of dialogical interaction always taking place within a socio-cultural sphere.

**From Social Positions and Voice Types to Cultural Mediation  
and Socio-Cultural Spheres**

Discussing culture within dialogical self theory as process oriented mediation and as dynamically constituting both societal and psychological mechanisms generates two main implications. As outlined above, the first is concerned with cultural processes mediating dialogical interactions within the self-system on the intra-individual level. The second implication concerns the bi-directional and constitutive characteristic of cultural mediation and discusses the dialogical self as situated within a socio-cultural sphere in which cultural mediation is generated. This point will be discussed further down.

*Cultural mediation on the intra-individual level*

Concerning cultural mediation on an intra-individual level within dialogical self theory, the main implication we can infer from viewing the above arguments is to make an explicit shift from focusing on individual voices and their respective positions to their interactional processes—to the production of utterances. Such a shift necessitates that all voices and positions alike are always necessarily culturally mediated, as it is through the usage of cultural tools, such as language, that action and interaction are guided and constrain according to specific cultural structures (Vygotsky, 1929/1994; compare also Wertsch, 1985). Thus, as discussed above, it is not culture in itself that can be seen as a collective voice or as a social position. Rather, the cultural processes that guide and constrain dialogical interactions become accessible within the language with which each voice speaks. From this perspective collective voices signify the societal structure within each voice while psychological processes are simultaneously present, both representing two sides of the same coin, both simultaneously being culturally mediated in a bi-directional manner by language. The two language examples described above—lullabies and spatial conceptualization—were chosen to demonstrate this point more clearly. Within these examples language, as cultural tool, mediates on the one hand psychological processes, while on the other hand, simultaneously mediating social interactions.

*Dialogical interactions within socio-cultural spheres*

The explicit shift from individual voices and their respective positions to mediational processes within the dialogical interactions ultimately bares the questions of where this interaction takes place. This brings us to the second implication of a dynamically constitutive approach to culture within dialogical self theory: the situatedness of a dialogical self within a socio-cultural sphere. Before relating the socio-cultural sphere to dialogical self theory I would like to point out that this implication of a socio-cultural perspective—being situated within a socio-cultural sphere—is again not necessarily a novel conception for dialogical self scholars. Hermans (2001), for

example, points to the guiding and constraining nature of cultural structures and patterns in relation to communicative acts and further states that “the microcontext of concrete dialogical relationships cannot be understood without some concept of macroframes” (p.264). In this sense Bakhtin (1986/2003) argues—and Hermans (2001) refers to this conception—that singular utterances are only able to exist within specific social milieus. Here Hermans clearly acknowledges the intricate interrelated nature of culture and self-development. It is therefore not necessary to introduce the socio-cultural sphere as novel conception to the dialogical theory. It is however the aim of this paper to elaborate upon this conception and bring forth various further implications a socio-cultural perspective generates within dialogical self theory. For further elaboration of what it means to only be able to exist within specific social milieus and to stress the importance of understanding macroframes for a culture-inclusive self-conception, the following paragraphs return to Solterdijk’s (1998, 1999, 2004) notion of spheres once more.

### **Relating Atmospheres to the Dialogical Self**

In contrast to singular voices and positions, cultural processes are here conceptualized more in terms of a wind blowing through the whole phenomenon of a self, as a tainting atmosphere within specific socio-cultural spheres. This atmosphere emerges out of the constituting forces of all inhabitants<sup>6</sup> and out of everyday mundane interaction (e.g. language), reiteration and habituation (Bamberg & Zielke, 2007). Each and every action is necessarily enveloped and saturated by the atmosphere and thus also every single dialogical utterance.

Relating such a cultural enveloping process to language, Sluneko and Hengl (2007) state that persons “all are inspired and formatted by our contemporaries’ and predecessors’ discourse” (p. 56). Language not only fundamentally co-constitutes dynamically what we perceive in the world and which propositions we pick, but through the use of language the socio-cultural sphere also takes on personal psychological forms. This perspective can explain why language and

culture is in the body and in time before it is reflected upon and talked about in consciousness, or literature. This is why culture runs deep and languages leave their traces in rhythmic feel and anticipatory emotion, in life and literary art. (Gratier & Trevarthen, 2007, p. 176)

The subtle structuring processes of discourse are here included into the description of what it means to be a human being. Yet, it is important to remember, that language is not the only semiotic devices which co-constitutes the human being. This point will be elaborated in the discussion. So far the person here is depicted, with language as only one example of a semiotic mediational device, as a ‘floating being’

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<sup>6</sup> Humans and objects alike, compare e.g. Latour, 1999, specifically pp. 174-215.

(*Schwebewesen*), one that tunes into an atmosphere of resonating with others. Yet, the resonating process is not restricted to language or discourse. Further semiotic dimensions, as discussed below, share these co-constituting qualities. In this sense all perception is necessarily tainted, directed and guided by the general atmosphere of specific societal structures, not only through linguistic or discursive processes. With and through persons resonating, an interdependent field emerges and within this field or sphere the general perception and understanding of what is happening ‘out there’ is determined. Accordingly, not only all *I*-positions, their properties and dialogicality emerge through the person-environment interaction (Bamberg & Zielke, 2007), but also the precise structure of their *interactions*, their social language and the connotations of all voices and utterances or, keeping in mind that *all* voices simultaneously speaks through them, the collective voices. In this sense culture is seen not as ‘belonging to’ the self-system, but rather as manifesting itself within the person-environment interaction where it also mediates this interaction.

### **Discussion**

#### *Implications and Future Research Suggestions*

While the aim of this paper has been to underline the socio-cultural potentials within the dialogical self theoretical framework, there is not much use in advancing theoretical implications without being able to implement these considerations on an empirical level. The theoretical implication of a dynamic co-constitution of culture and self calls for methodologies that focus, as Bamberg and Zielke (2007) have pointed out, on the dynamic and emerging processes of the interrelatedness of culture and self. The main methodologies applied for studying the self concept have been self-report questionnaires, interviews and content analysis of various data sources. Whether one uses questionnaires, interviews or focus groups, the tendency in research has been to ask people about their identities. Gillespie (2009) has pointed out that it is rather difficult to surpass the reflexive self-reported identifications and self-conceptions from such data. The question thus turns to which kind of data and methods of analysis could be more productive in making visible the implicit dynamics, such as cultural processes, of identity?

The suggestion here is to move away from the actual *content* of self-reports and focus on more implicit *cultural and societal structures* that scaffold these self-reports or interviews. Furthermore, this shift of focus from content analysis to structure analysis need not necessarily be reduced to verbal interaction. In fact, since verbal interaction has been one of the main sources of gathering data for dialogical self research (Valsiner & Han, 2008), it would be desirable if more non-verbal material would be considered in

identity research.<sup>7</sup> Ruck and Slunecko (2008) have contributed to dialogical self research in this respect with their paper on image studies. In this contribution they follow the reconstructive approach of the documentary method as postulated by Bohnsack and colleagues (Bohnsack, 2001; Bohnsack & Nohl, 2003; as cited in Ruck & Slunecko, 2008) and show how the arts, and more specifically pictorial images, portray a rich source for dialogical interaction between person and environment and how cultural structures can be made visible from interpreting these artefacts. The implication of a dynamic constitution of culture and person calls for further such research projects.

### Summary

The aim of this article has been to discuss the notion of culture within dialogical self theory with the example of language as cultural mediation. The respective theory has aspired to set up a theoretical framework for a self that is ‘culture-inclusive.’ With the notion of ventriloquation, social language and collective voices it was able to emphasise the socio-cultural perspective which highlights cultural processes as manifesting themselves within the person-environment interaction while simultaneously mediating these very interactions.

Accordingly the term culture was described as structural processes that dynamically co-constitute individual actions as well as the human surrounding—the socio-cultural sphere. Viewed as autopoietic system, human beings constitute their media, their symbolic systems, and these systems constitute human beings (Slunecko, 2008). Both are structured by the other in a simultaneous loop of redefining and reformatting each other while at the same time these definitions are constantly forced open only to be again redefined.

The process of persons continuously and dynamically co-constituting each other was further addressed in terms of how people resonate with one another and tune into the general atmosphere of specific socio-cultural spheres. Sloterdijk’s (1998, 1999, 2004) notion of spheres served as inspiration for describing how cultural structures are defined within the very core of human sphere. From this perspective the relationships of the terms collective voices, social language and culture within dialogical self theory were analyzed with the aim of highlighting socio-cultural premises within the theoretical framework and to then discuss some important implications on the intra-individual level as well as on a societal level.

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<sup>7</sup> This is of course not surprising as Markova and Foppa (1990) have pointed out that dialogical systems are dependent on language. It indeed may seem strange that the whole article discusses language and that then the reader is urged to conduct empirical research in another field. Yet, it was stressed that language was chosen here as one example of cultural mediation. Language may be one of the most important cultural mediational means, but it is by far not the only one and empirical research should thus also consider other cultural tools such as pictures, literature, myths or simple every day habits.



## DIALOGICAL SELF AND CULTURAL PROCESSES

Discussing collective voices, social language and culture from a dynamic constitutive perspective served to benefit the dialogical self theory, as it highlights the fact that all produced utterances within a dialogical self are necessarily culturally mediated and not solely individual voices and positions. Such a perspective is essential for future cultural identity research, in which the dialogical self model has often been applied with a reduction of culture to a kind of “geography of the self” (Valsiner & Han, 2008). The focus shifts from individualistic and static premises to a more dynamic and saturated concept of culture. The discussion on socio-cultural atmospheres served to underline the bi-directional characteristic of cultural tools. From this perspective culture cannot be explicated within dialogical self theory as belonging to the individual. It must be conceptualized as cultural mediation which is self-generating and a constituent of the socio-cultural atmosphere in which dialogical interactions take place. The aim of emphasizing these dynamic processes was to aid in further moving dialogical self theory away from the Cartesian paradigm.

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