Discourse or Dialogue?

Habermas, the Bakhtin Circle and the Question of Concrete Utterances

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Abstract

This paper argues that the Bakhtin Circle presents a more realistic theory of concrete dialogue than the theory of discourse elaborated by Habermas. The Bakhtin Circle places speech within the "concrete whole utterance" and by this phrase they mean that the study of everyday language should be analysed through the mediations of historical social systems such as capitalism. These mediations are also characterised by a determinate set of contradictions – the capital-labour contradiction in capitalism, for example – which are reproduced in unique ways in more concrete forms of life (the state, education, religion, culture, and so on). Utterances always *dialectically* refract these processes and as such are internal concrete moments, or concrete social forms, of them. Moreover, new and unrepeatable dialogic events arise in these concrete social forms in order to overcome and understand the constant dialectical flux of social life. But this theory of dialogue is different to that expounded by Habermas who tends to explore speech acts by reproducing a dualism between repeatable and universal "abstract" discursive processes (commonly known as the ideal speech situation) and empirical uses of discourse. These critical points against Habermas are developed by focusing on six main areas: sentences and utterances; the lifeworld and background language; active versus passive understandings of language; validity claims; obligation and relevance in language; and dialectical universalism.

Key words: active dialogue; background language; dialectics; lifeworld; universalism

Jürgen Habermas has been rightly praised for his work on areas as diverse as social theory, philosophy of language, ethics, and modernity. Many of these areas are brought together in the pioneering work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984; 1987) in which Habermas outlines a consensus theory of deliberation based on a division between systems and lifeworld. Systems encompass self-contained and self-reproducing subsystems whose principle aim is to carry out single functional tasks for society as a whole (Habermas 1987, p. 172). Habermas has in mind the subsystems of the modern economy and the administrative (state) system which are each guided by single functional tasks for society as whole. In the economy, for example, we discover the functional self-reproduction of wages exchanged against labour and goods as well as services exchanged against consumer demand. In the administrative system, for example, we discover the functional self-reproduction of political decisions that engender mass loyalty from voters and the functional self-reproduction of administrative performance in exchange for taxes (Habermas 1987, p. 319).

Whereas systems are motivated by action orientated towards the successful achievement of functional tasks, Habermas suggests that the lifeworld is mediated through communicative action founded on the necessity to reach understanding between participants. Three structural properties – culture, society and personality – are evident in the lifeworld and these are related to three further reproduction processes of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialisation.

> I use the term *culture* for the stock of knowledge from which participants in communication supply themselves with interpretations as they come to an understanding about something in the world. I use the term *society* for the legitimate orders through which participants regulate their memberships in social groups and thereby secure solidarity. By *personality* I understand the competences that make a subject capable of speaking and acting, that put him in a position to take part in processes of reaching understanding and thereby to assert his own identity (Habermas 1987, p. 138, italics in the original).

Habermas further argues that from these three structural components a person will if the need arises be able to justify their argument through rational reflection based on three universal validity claims: that the propositional content of what is said is true; that the performative content is normatively correct; and that the intentions expressed are sincere (Habermas 1984, pp. 69-70; see also the next sections). Commonly known as the 'ideal speech situation' such validity claims act as a constraint on discourse by moving a speaker to embark on a process of argumentation with a listener with the result being that a consensus of understanding about an issue under consideration can be reached. One of Habermas's main points in outlining his theory of communicative action is therefore to show that strategic and functional action is parasitic on discursive communicative action. That is to say, communicative action is the primary mode of interaction in modern society and is designed to elicit consensus and understanding between participants. Action that appears in systems subsequently presupposes communicative forms of action and rationality.

Habermas has however been extensively criticised in making this claim. One set of common criticisms insist that communicative action unnecessarily abstracts away from 'ordinary' and 'everyday' discursive encounters in empirical social contexts. Thompson (1982, pp. 126-129) presents an early version of this criticism when he argues that the ideal speech situation tends to ignore how a multitude of everyday forms of speech such as telling jokes have no need to raise validity claims. Thompson also adds that the consensus aimed for by the ideal speech situation could in theory be reached without recourse to validity claims. For example, a consensus might arise which simply reflects an existing status quo. In this instance, constraints on discursive consensus such as wealth or social esteem are just as important as validity claims.

Other critical theorists have made similar observations to the extent that they suggest Habermas presents a disembodied account of deliberation insofar that the ideal speech situation is divorced from how discourse is actually produced in concrete social settings (McNay 2008, p. 86). Benhabib (1986) for example is critical of Habermas's insistence that discourse concerns the ability of people to consider normative questions from a universalist standpoint in order to arrive at a moral consensus. According to Benhabib, this creates a trans-contextual form of argumentation which diminishes the

impact of "real conflict situations" (Benhabib 1986, p. 321). It is therefore not at all clear why participants would be willing to take part in an ideal speech situation if they believe their 'conflict situations' will not be granted due respect during the deliberative process (Benhabib 1986, p. 321). Young (1987) makes a similar point when she notes that Habermas's ideal speech situation:

> (E)xpels and devalues difference, the concreteness of the body, the affective aspects of speech, the musical and figurative aspects of all utterances…(Young 1987, p. 71).

Elsewhere Benhabib (1992) argues that Habermas stands in a long line of liberal theorists all too ready to construct a 'generalised other', a non-corporeal substance, through which individuals communicate with one another in a position of equality. For Benhabib the problem with this theoretical viewpoint is that it creates an ideal-typical moral subject disembodied from real social relations. Benhabib compares the generalised other to what she theoretically prefers as a "concrete other". The concrete other refers to "forms of behaviour through which the other feels recognised and confirmed as a concrete, individual being with specific needs, talents and capacities" (Benhabib 1992, p. 159). It is through the concrete other that morality is able to relate directly to everyday knowledge such as childhood experiences, relationships of everyday care, popular beliefs, and ordinary identity formations. In other words, Benhabib highlights the need to move beyond the non-historical and non-social 'liberal subject' of the generalised other; a subject premised on abstract and trans-contextual modes of rationality and individualism (see also Fraser 1992). The purpose of this paper is to argue that it does indeed make sense to criticise Habermas for placing undue emphasis on an ideal speech situation to the neglect of more concrete factors during deliberative encounters. Unlike some social theorists, however, this argument will be made by recourse to the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin and his collaborators Pavel Medvedev and V. N. Voloshinov who have become known as the Bakhtin Circle.

In many respects this choice might appear somewhat strange considering that the Bakhtin Circle share remarkable similarities with Habermas in how they examine language. For example, Bakhtin like Habermas is interested in how language is mediated

through ethical values such as sincerity and truth and how these gain meaning through everyday background forms of communication. And some Bakhtinians have used the Bakhtin Circle to present a more concrete approach to deliberation that complements Habermas's more abstract approach. Nielsen (1995, p. 808) for instance suggests that an over-reliance on Habermas leads to a rigid adherence of universal pragmatics and normative procedures at the expense of how people creatively use utterances during actual dialogic acts. An over-reliance on the Bakhtin Circle on the other hand leads one to embrace a one-sided emphasis on everyday dialogic consciousness at the expense of reconstructing normative explanations (see also Nielsen 2002, pp. 27-48). But when employed together these problems can be ironed out and a theory developed that stresses creativity in dialogue by ordinary people alongside normative commitments operating in language use. One final similarity concerns Habermas's and the Bakhtin Circle's use of the term "utterance" when talking about the creative use of language in everyday life. Indeed, Habermas often integrates one of his key analytical terms, namely speech acts, with that of utterances (e.g. Habermas 1984, p. 278). And like the Bakhtin Circle, Habermas makes a distinction between sentences and utterances by claiming that the elemental unit of language is the sentence whereas the elemental unit of speech is the utterance, or speech act (Habermas 1979, p. 31).

Despite these complementarities and similarities the paper will nevertheless argue that the Bakhtin Circle is more attuned to how language is actually used in *everyday* and *real* acts of speech than is Habermas. Of course, and as has already been noted, many others such as Benhabib have made similar arguments against Habermas in the past (see also Cooren 2000, p. 295). Indeed, some Bakhtinians also suggest that the Bakhtin Circle appreciate to a far greater degree than Habermas how language exists in embodied living dialogue populated by innumerable concrete intentions. The ideal speech situation with its emphasis on clear unmediated understanding is thus found wanting from a Bakhtinian perspective because it fails to appreciate how concrete utterances are in fact "complex amalgams of different points of view" (Gardiner 2004, pp. 37).

While the paper is sympathetic to these critical observations it nevertheless departs from them in one substantial way. Often, the claims made against Habermas turn in their known respective ways on the point that the ideal speech situation simply ignores

or brackets out concrete and embodied everyday (empirical) experiences. Yet, this critical observation tends to establish a binary dualism in social theory whereby an abstract theoretical standpoint (in this case Habermas's ideal speech situation) is contrasted to a concrete/empirical theoretical standpoint (e.g. Benhabib's preferred position). Such a dualism therefore enables Habermasians to argue that critics have merely misinterpreted Habermas's oeuvre. For example, supporters insist that Habermas's theory of communicative action is clearly premised on the idea that intersubjective discourse will be expressed in part through everyday passionate narratives around sincere personal experiences which are attuned to concrete experiences (Dahlberg 2005). Indeed, some argue that Habermas's injunction to examine a specific state of affairs, contextual norms, and inner states of self present a set of concrete theoretical terms that can be applied critically to empirical research contexts in order to ascertain how real discursive participants accept or reject some specific concrete state of affairs, consent or challenge a set of concrete norms, and trust or challenge another's outwardly expressed inner states of self (Forester 1992, p. 49).

For its part, this paper instead argues for a *dialectical* and *materialist* approach to these issues that conceptualises "abstract" and "concrete" as having an internal and necessary relationship. In practice this viewpoint conceptualises utterances as concrete and contradictory internalisations of more abstract material contradictory processes. Concrete utterances thus obtain ideological forms of existence because they refract, or are moments of, more abstract determinate contradictory social relations. A typical illustration of this point is that of capitalism. From a materialist perspective capitalism is comprised at an abstract level by the determinate contradiction between capital and labour. Yet this contradiction is refracted in qualitatively unique ways into concrete social forms. But as qualitative contradictory forms, these refracted concrete processes often prove problematic for the functional reproduction of more abstract contradictions. However, this is to be expected from a dialectical perspective which underlines the importance of contradictions in facilitating, disrupting, and breaking apart social life. Furthermore, this dialectical perspective enables the Bakhtin Circle to not only embrace ethical questions in their overall theory of dialogue but also to overcome the perennial problems of equating the concrete with the empirically observable and then separating

both from abstract social processes. Arguably, it is Habermas and many of his critics who reproduce these problems in their respective theories of language. The Bakhtin Circle on the contrary is interested in thinking about how abstract social processes are refracted in concrete utterances, with the "concrete" being analysed at different levels of abstraction. Some concrete utterances will thus be located at a more empirical level than other concrete utterances, ensuring that the concrete is not theorised as being necessarily the same as the empirically observable. National languages, for instance, are a concrete manifestation of the more abstract properties of language but this does not mean that national languages should necessarily be analysed in their empirical use by any single speaker. What is distinctive about the paper's take on these issues, then, is that it demonstrates how a Bakhtinian dialectical approach to concrete *dialogue* opens up the possibility to examine ethical questions about dialogue in their concrete and everyday use without reproducing some of the problems embedded in Habermas's more abstract theory of *discourse*.

The next section begins this critical discussion by looking at how Habermas and the Bakhtin Circle explore language. This is a particularly useful place to begin the discussion because while both seem to have similar ideas on this subject it will nevertheless be possible to argue that important differences are also evident between them on how they conceptualise sentences and utterances. In particular, the next section begins to set out how the Bakhtin Circle develops a materialist theory of language quite at odds with Habermas's theory. This will provide a basis in later sections to critically explore some of other key insights on Habermas's ideal type theory of discourse through the Bakhtin Circle's dialectical theory of dialogue, especially in the areas of the lifeworld, validity claims, and universalism.

Sentences and utterances

In an early essay written in 1976 Habermas states: "We regard the speech act as the elementary unit of speech – i.e. as the smallest (verbal) utterance sequence which is comprehensible and acceptable to at least one other component actor within a communications context" (Habermas 1976, p. 155). Drawing from amongst others the

speech act theory of John Austin, Habermas argues language is mediated through three speech acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. Locutionary acts refer to states of affairs and consist of propositional sentences. Illocutionary acts constitute the performative moment of language in so far that an action is performed by a speaker at the moment they say something. Often illocutionary acts are created through a performative verb in the first person presence such as "I hereby promise you…" (Habermas 1984, p. 289). Propositional elements of illocutionary speech acts are therefore arrived at through pragmatic conditions. Perlocutionary acts refer to the moment when a speaker produces an effect in the world. These acts thus exist externally to the meaning of what is said. But whereas perlocutionary acts intervene in the world to causally affect somebody else, illocutionary acts, in the very nature of the discursive act itself, seek to create understanding between participants. Illocutionary speech acts are thus "achieved at the level of interpersonal relations on which participants in communication come to an understanding with something in the world" (Habermas 1984, p. 293).

For Habermas, it is the illocutionary moment in language which provides a crucial coordinating axis for communication. This is because illocutionary speech acts – "to act *in* saying something" (Habermas 1984, p. 289; italics in the original) – open up the possibility to arrive at consensus and understanding between individuals through argumentation within the very structure of language itself. In particular, Habermas argues that three validity claims of truth, normative rightness and truthfulness are present in illocutionary acts (see Habermas 1979, p. 32).[1] Argumentation thus builds an

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[1] Illocutionary speech can be broken down into three further speech acts which correspond to these three validity claims. Constative speech acts refer to assertions, descriptions, classifications, predictions objections, and so on, through which we make claims of "truth of corresponding propositions…" (Habermas 1979, p. 63). Constative speech acts thus "contain the offer to recur if necessary to the *experiential source* from which the speaker draws the *certainty* that his statement is true" (Habermas 1979, 63-4, italics in the original). Regulative speech acts refer to requests, orders, promises, excuses, admonitions, and so on, through which we make claims about "the rightness of norms or to the ability of the subject to assume responsibility" (Habermas 1979, p. 63). Therefore, "regulative speech acts contain only the offer to indicate, if necessary, the *normative context* that gives the speaker the *conviction* that his utterance is right" (Habermas 1979, p. 64, italics in the original). Expressive speech acts refer to beliefs, hopes, fears, desires, and so on, through which we aim to (e.g.) truthfully reveal ourselves to another or to deceive. "(I)n the expressive use of language the speaker also enters into a speech-act-immanent obligation…*to prove trustworthy*…to show in the consequences of his action that he has expressed just that intention which actually guides his behaviour" (Habermas 1979, p. 64; italics in the original; see also Habermas 1984, p. 309).

interpersonal relationship between participants whereby reasons are put forward as to the validity status of certain utterances. A basis is therefore created for consensus to be arrived at (see Habermas 1984, p. 293). To successfully undertake this task both speaker and hearer must also be satisfied that certain conditions have been met. Key for Habermas to this "binding" effect of validity between speaker and hearer is that of a "warranty" to provide convincing reasons for holding a particular belief to criticisms against it.

> Thus a speaker owes the binding…force of his illocutionary act not to the validity of what is said but to the *coordinating effect of the warranty* that he offers; namely to redeem, if necessary, the validity raised with his speech act (Habermas 1984, p. 302, italics in the original).

The main difference then between a sentence and a speech act, or utterance, is that a sentence aims to be comprehensible to another person whereas a speech act aims to be both comprehensible and to reach understanding between interlocutors by raising validity claims (Habermas 1979, p. 32).

Rejecting a Kantian transcendental viewpoint where *a priori* conditions of experience are established at the outset, Habermas therefore instead argues for a weaker or "detranscendentalized" theory (Habermas 2003, pp. 88-90) in which the "hypothetical proposal" of discourse (the ideal speech situation) "can be tested against new experiences" (Habermas 1979, p. 21; see also Habermas 1993, pp. 8-14) based on an ideal set of *obligations* within validity claims, i.e. obligations to provide grounds and justification for a belief and to prove trustworthy in doing so (Habermas 1979, p. 65). Thus Habermas suggests that when people communicate with one another they must inevitably presuppose that "a totality of independently existing objects" are apparent even if one can focus only on "spatiotemporally identifiable objects" at any one moment in time (Habermas 2003, p 89). In other words, while Habermas is adamant that such ideal conditions transcend "the provincial standards of a merely particular community of interpreters and their spatiotemporally localized communicative practice" (Habermas 1993, p. 52) he is also clear that validity claims designed to elicit understanding only gain a sense of obligation in pragmatic empirical conditions. Correspondingly, Habermas

insists that speech acts should first be investigated through "standard forms of meaning", i.e. a speaker's precise, explicit and literal intention and meaning in a proposition should ideally be matched to the literal meaning of a sentence. Only then is it possible to connect a speech act with a meaning in a sentence used to express propositional content (see Habermas 1979, pp. 39-40).

But it is at this point that we must question some of these claims about language. In particular, Habermas ties together utterances and sentences far too closely even at a high level of theoretical abstraction. As Cooke (1994, pp. 124-125) notes, Habermas seems to conflate propositional content in speech acts employed in real contexts with meanings evident in abstract sentences. Of course, Habermas is also aware that "(l)iteral meanings are…relative to deep-seated, implicit knowledge *about* which we normally know nothing, because it is simply unproblematic and does not pass the threshold of communicative utterances that can be valid or invalid" (Habermas 1984, p. 337, italics in the original). Yet he also resolute that while "deep-seated implicit knowledge" is a crucial context-dependent moment for validity claims it is still nevertheless the case that speech acts carried out through trans-contextual invariant "standard conditions" are the presupposition of communication orientated toward understanding.

According to Bakhtin it is wrong to conflate sentences with utterances in this manner even at a relatively high level of theoretical abstraction. As opposed to utterances, sentences are abstract units of meaning which frequently remain identical irrespective of time or space and can therefore be repeated "in completely identical form" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 108). One of the reasons why sentences remain identical is that they are ultimately comprised of "neutral dictionary meanings" devoid of context and generic specification (Bakhtin 1986, p. 88). It is for this reason that sentences are usually explored by linguists as existing in abstract grammatical systems of normative forms (see Bakhtin 1981, p. 288). In reality, however, no abstract stable normative form of language is present as such during actual dialogic events because each time a word is repeated and uttered in a real live event through real live utterances it is immediately transformed into a new dialogic theme (see also the next section). In contrast to sentences, therefore, utterances make use of words in language but do so by imbuing words with intentions and evaluative accents. "(A)ll words have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency,

a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day, the hour" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 293). Social class is an obvious illustration of this point. Different social classes will "accent" various utterances through particular evaluations based on factors such as "title…rank, wealth, social importance…" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 96). When people from different social classes engage in dialogue with one another, then their distinct evaluative accents will become more noticeable in a variety of ways. Familiar and intimate styles of address might not be apparent during this dialogic encounter, while difference might also be apparent in how each evaluates the other's dialogical response (Bakhtin 1986, p. 97).

While this approach to language might look to be the same to that proposed by Habermas there is in fact an important difference between the two. Habermas claims that speech acts operate at an invariant level at some distance from specific propositional content (Habermas 1979, p. 41). Therefore the normative form of a speech act always stays the same even if the propositional content differs in each actual empirical utterance. This is one reason why Habermas argues that standard forms of speech acts can be simply appropriated by propositional content; a content which corresponds to meanings given in sentences. From the perspective of the Bakhtin Circle, Habermas is wrong to claim that utterances can be analysed in such standard forms. In the first instance, pragmatic meaning of a proposition which is employed by a single speaker cannot correspond to precise meaning of a sentence because words exist in "in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 294). That is to say, words are inherently dialogical and so come to us through other people's accents and evaluations: "the word in language is half someone else's" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 293). Of course, it does not follow that a speaker can never populate a word "with his own accent" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 293). Yet this occurs through the already dialogical nature of language. A speaker will subsequently have to forgo the trans-contextual standardised speech acts which Habermas champions in order to make a word meaningful to a dialogic event at hand. Words cannot thereby exist in trans-contextual, standard, or invariant forms, and a word's meaning cannot simply be appropriated by individuals to express his or her literal meaning (after all language is awash with the

intentions of others and this entails that some words will for whatever reason resist appropriation by others).

In the second instance, Habermas is unequivocal in "restricting" his analysis "to paradigmatic cases of linguistically explicit action that is oriented to reaching understanding" (Habermas 1979, p. 35). This is the reason why he initially brackets out of an ideal speech situation "institutionally bounded speech actions". With institutionally bounded speech actions language will always be mediated by the normative meaning of the institution in question. That is to say, institutions merely articulate *conventions* but not meaningful procedures of argumentation (Habermas 1990, p. 92). A christening at a church serves as an illustration. In the confines of the institution of a church a baby is christened by following the already accepted conventions of what a christening entails. No argumentation is required of why these conventions are being followed during the christening event itself. Indeed, it would be rather strange if a person attempted to challenge these conventions by standing up and denouncing them through validity claims.

Institutionally *unbounded* speech acts, on the other hand, need only meet conditions of a generalised context for reaching understanding (Habermas 1979, p. 38). Practical discourse, for Habermas, is thus an endeavour to get to grips with a number of *idealizing* assumptions which all those engaged in argumentation *must* make during a discursive encounter. Idealizing assumptions include the tenets that "all affected can in principle freely participate as equals in a cooperative search for the truth in which the force of the better argument alone can influence the outcome" and that "only moral rules that could win the assent of all affected as participants in a practical discourse can claim validity" (Habermas 1993, pp. 49-50). To clarify, then, Habermas wants to separate an ideal speech situation based on "transcendental constraints" which "*make possible* the practice that participants understand as argumentation" from concrete institutionalised discourses that "obligate specific groups of people to engage in argumentation" through conventions (Habermas 1993, p. 31, italics in the original).

But the Bakhtin Circle are highly critical of those theories that put forward a dualist argument which suggests that abstract meanings in language forms gain significance by being creatively used by people in empirically observed social contexts

(see Voloshinov 1973, pp. 45-64). For example, in Habermas's case this problematic dualism is reproduced in the distinction between practical discourse and its institutional appearance in a concrete context. In making this distinction it is not entirely clear how language gains specific meanings and themes through various historical levels of analysis. As Kent observes:

> Contextual analysis certainly helps to explain why a sentence – as an utterance – might be interpreted to mean x in situation y, but contextual analysis can tell us nothing about how the sentence came to mean x in situation y (Kent 1993, p. 138).

For the Bakhtin Circle, however, utterances live and breathe in real *historical and socially specific* environments in which dialogue "cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around a given object of an utterance" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 276; see also Bakhtin 1986, p. 109). This does not mean that the Bakhtin Circle *reduces* dialogue to empirical interactions between speakers and hearers. Quite the opposite is true. They recognise that everyday dialogue is complexly structured and stratified by different social forces such as social groups, social classes, social professions, social structures, social belief systems, seemingly unified national language, and so on (Bakhtin 1981, p. 288). As Bakhtin observes:

> Oppositions between individuals are only surface upheavals…of those elements that play *on* such individual oppositions, make them contradictory, saturate their consciousness and discourses with more a more fundamental speech diversity (Bakhtin 1981, p. 326, italics in the original).

The complexity of dialogue cannot therefore be framed only through "mere conversations between persons" in clear empirically marked boundaries (Bakhtin 1981, p. 326). Each empirical context uniquely refracts the historically specific social complexity of life at different levels of abstraction. Indeed, Bakhtin and Medvedev make the dialectical point that a single empirical object gains a unique individual identity only to the extent that it is seen as belonging to "a complex system of interconnections and mutual influences" (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978, p. 27). For example, a single book of

literature cannot be fully understood outside of the wider ideological field of literature. In turn, this field cannot be fully understood outside of a wider ideological environment of other interacting social fields (education, politics, welfare, religion, media, and so on), which are themselves mediated through historically specific and deeper systemic contradictions such as those associated with social class relations. None of this is of course to suggest that a one-way causal process can be observed between these mediations. Bakhtin and Medvedev clearly state that while an "external" environment affects the "internal" identity of an empirical object it is also the case that the "internal" identity is already an integral unique moment of an "external" environment (e.g. a single book is already a unique moment in a literary field and thus a unique moment of a number of other fields). This "simple dialectic" implies that "the intrinsic turns out to be extrinsic, and the reverse" (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978, p. 29; see also Bakhtin 1984: pp. 26-27; Roberts 2004a; see also the sections below).

It is therefore misguided to conceive of an ideal speech situation as being simply reproduced in an empirical concrete setting. What such an approach by-passes are the complex mediations of a concrete dialogic event. Indeed, the problem of simply bringing together both abstract speech acts in a creative concrete context becomes apparent with Habermas when he has to resort to intuition in order to explain the gap between ideal speech and its empirical use. For example, Habermas says that "(e)very speaker knows intuitively that an alleged argument is not a serious one if the appropriate (i.e. ideal – JMR) conditions are violated…" (Habermas 1993, p. 56). The Bakhtin Circle argues to the contrary that there can be no 'intuition' as such in dialogue because this is a trans-historical and trans-contextual view of dialogue. What might appear to be intuition is in fact a thought process which has already been historically situated and subject to dialogic processes. Thus it is exactly this 'intuitive' moment that we need to investigate because what might conceivably seem to be a deeply embedded inner, almost primordial, moment of the psyche has already accommodated itself "*to the potentialities of our expression, its possible routes and directions*" (Voloshinov 1973, p. 91, italics in the original).[2]

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[2] Anyhow, by having to resort to 'intuition' there is a danger that Habermas will end up defending the ideal speech situation by resorting to a psychological rather than social explanation.

In the next section we will expand on these critical points in more detail by focusing on how Habermas examines taken-for-granted assumptions in his depiction of the lifeworld. In particular it will be argued that Habermas articulates a passive understanding of the lifeworld which is at variance with an active understanding of background language by the Bakhtin Circle. This will be achieved by illustrating how the Bakhtin Circle not only accounts for dialogue in empirical contexts but also how they explore utterances as being integrally related to other socially mediated concrete factors such as evaluations, themes and speech genres. By focusing in particular on everyday language use and utterance themes the next section will deepen our analysis of the Bakhtin Circle's ideas on the concrete use of language and dialogue, which will in turn be used to make further critical observations on Habermas.

Lifeworld and background language

As well as its three structural properties (culture, society and personality) Habermas suggests that the lifeworld is comprised by a pre-reflective background taken-for-granted set of established assumptions. Lifeworld assumptions come together to form "the horizon of everyday action" (Habermas 1984, p. 335) made up of implicit knowledge. Communicative action, which itself is located in this horizon, is the reflective moment of taken-for-granted assumptions evident in the lifeworld (see also Habermas 1984, pp. 70-71).

Each communicative act is first informed by the background assumptions of specific empirical plans of action while themes play an important role in the lifeworld in so far that they act as a sort of mediator between everyday empirical assumptions and communicative action. Habermas illustrates this point through the everyday plan of action in which an older construction worker asks a new younger worker to fetch some beers for a midmorning snack. We thus see the following relationship at play in this empirical situation.

> The *theme* is the upcoming midmorning snack; taking care of the drinks is a *goal*
> related to this theme; one of the older workers comes up with the *plan* to send the

'new guy', who, given his status, cannot easily get around this request (Habermas 1987, p. 121, italics in the original).

 At least initially the order to get beers must be perceived against the taken-for-granted background horizon through which workers recognise the informal hierarchy in operation in this empirical workplace and recognise the everyday temporal pattern that stipulates there will soon be a break. Theme and plan thus "mark off a situation from the lifeworld of those directly involved" in an action situation. And by marking off a situation the possibility presents itself for communicative action to arise. The younger worker might for example challenge the order through one or more of the three validity claims.

How the Bakhtin Circle discusses the background of dialogue is similar although also subtly different to Habermas. Like Habermas, Bakhtin argues:

> The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme… (Bakhtin 1981, p. 281).

Yet Bakhtin immediately follows this by saying that the background language of other concrete utterances is "made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgements…" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 281). In other words, how language is actually used in real utterances is dependent on a language background which is in itself contradictory and constantly in flux. Background language thus contains "the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions" of different temporal moments and different socio-ideological viewpoints evident in groups of people, organisations, and so on (Bakhtin 1981, p. 291). Workplaces typically exhibit many of these contradictions. For example, a workplace often harbours a contradiction between the interests of employees and those of management. Whilst management might use certain utterances to insinuate that all are part of a work-related 'family', employees might to the contrary be sceptical of such language, believing instead that it masks stringent managerial prerogatives (Roberts 2009). Or there might be a contradiction in the workplace between improvements in technology used by workers and the use of this technology by management to intensify labour output (Gough 2003, pp.52-53). Or there could also be a contradiction between

collaborative working practices and individualised wage relations that force workers to forgo collaboration in favour of entering into competition with one another (Adler 2006, pp. 185-187). The important point is that utterances will internalise and refract such material contradictions in their own unique manner (see Voloshinov 1973, pp. 9-24).

How Bakhtin characterises the background of language and its relationship to theme and utterances is therefore significantly different to how Habermas characterises background knowledge in the lifeworld. As we have seen, the lifeworld for Habermas is comprised of *taken-for-granted* assumptions that create consensual understanding within a specific empirical context. Even a theme and its associated plan of action do not *necessarily* disrupt this consensual understanding. In relation to the example of the workers Habermas assumes that the habit of taking a break at a particular time is already consensually expressed by workers before the appearance of the new worker commanded to fetch beer. Indeed, Habermas says there is a normative framework functioning here in which all accept that one person is allowed to tell another to do something. In this situation, then, theme merely represents the thematic unity of the various already established meanings of taking a break in an empirical context.

The Bakhtin Circle agrees that meaning in words is often self-reproducible in empirical contexts. However, they additionally argue that meaning has an abstract existence which only becomes significant during an actual dialogic event in unique and unrepeatable concrete themes. Themes refract the inherent socio-ideological contradictions embedded in background language, and the theme of an utterance transforms abstract meanings into a concrete and historical living whole (Voloshinov 1973, p. 99). Theme and meaning exist in a dialectical relationship and no understanding of one can be comprehensively accomplished without an understanding of the other. Meaning is "the technical apparatus for the implementation of a theme" while theme is a reaction by participants to their dialogic "generative process of existence" (Voloshinov 1973, p. 100). In other words, one of the problems with Habermas's presentation of lifeworld and theme is that it lacks a theory of contradiction. As such it is difficult to see how creative activity and learning might ensue in a dialogic context such as a particular workplace. Contradictions elicit critical thinking on the part of social individuals like workers because they throw up specific problems that need to be solved (see Livingstone

and Sawchuk 2004). But as is evident from his discussion of the midmorning snack, Habermas prefers to highlight consensual taken-for-granted expectations in a workplace.

Instead of a word containing a homogeneous meaning, then, it is truer to say that a single word often contains a multiplicity of potential meanings because it is reproduced within a plethora of unique themes during a dialogic event. Each word in the sentence, 'I love you', contains a meaning. But when transformed into an utterance during an actual dialogic event these meanings gain new potential as they take on unrepeatable thematic potency. "I love you" might for instance be transformed into a theme of sarcasm if uttered by one spurned lover in an argument with his/her now ex-partner. Meaning is thus fluid and not static because as it moves through themes it undergoes change (Moro 1999: 169). Subsequently, one can discern a multiplicity of content and sense of an utterance depending on the dialectical interplay of meaning and theme during specific dialogic events. To summarise, whereas Habermas tends to explore discursive themes to emphasise *thematic unity of meaning* the Bakhtin Circle examine theme to highlight *unrepeatable* dialogic events that make use of but also transcend a given meaning (see Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978, p. 132).

The issue of contradiction in language will be discussed again in later sections when the Bakhtin Circle's dialectical viewpoint is explored in more depth. Before that discussion however it is important to comprehensively demonstrate how the Bakhtin Circle's theory of background language equips one with an active understanding of dialogue quite at odds with a passive understanding of discourse.

Active understanding of dialogue vs. a passive understanding of discourse

Encompassed in a Bakhtinian view of background language is an *active* understanding of dialogue. Active understanding endeavours to grasp how an utterance is integrally related to a world of "contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgements" embedded in background language. An utterance directed towards an object will therefore immediately encounter an array of other utterances imbued with values, points of views, shared

thoughts, accents, and so on about the object in question (Bakhtin 1981, p. 276). One word is thus answerable to other words because it anticipates how a hearer, or number of hearers, will respond to one's own words through the diverse utterances of others. Response is thereby predicated on assimilating the multiaccentual and inner dialectical nature of a word into one's own conceptual system and merging this word with a responsive address to a hearer or number of hearers (Bakhtin 1981: 282). Typically, then, real everyday speech performs a role for the transmission of values, judgements, recollections, and so on, of other people's utterances. When we hear such speech it is over laden with such words as, "He says…", "it is said…", "people say…" The point to make is that everyday speech will contain words that will in fact be half of another person's words "transmitted with varying degrees of precision and impartiality…" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 339). Responsive attitudes underline everyday speech ensuring that a speaker can immediately become a listener and vice versa. Listeners actively prepare their answers as a speaker is speaking to them and will agree or disagree with a speaker through this responsive attitude. Understanding is therefore also a responsive attitude so that a listener will become a speaker and vice versa. Background language is subsequently pregnant with possibilities linked to answerability and unrepeatable themes.

Bakhtin compares an active understanding of dialogue with a passive understanding of language. Confined to analysing what is the same within common language, a passive understanding explores "an utterance's *neutral signification* and not its *actual meaning*" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 281, italics in the original). The problem with a passive understanding of language, then, is that it tends to examine clarity elicited by utterances at the expense of investigating how utterances actually play themselves out in real dialogic events. One notable illustration explored from the previous section, which again is highlighted by Cooke (1994: 128), comes in the form of a "semanticist abstraction" used by Habermas that he himself warns against, namely explaining the meaning of an utterance from the meaning of a sentence independent of its actual use in real dialogic encounters (see for example Habermas 1990, pp. 69-70). Cooke, however, thinks this is not a fatal flaw in Habermas's theory. For example, reaching understanding between a speaker and a hearer is also based on everyday narratives that exist in concrete space and time (Cooke 1994, p. 128; see also the useful discussion in McCarthy 1978, pp.

273-82). But while this is true there are three reasons why we should remain cautious of Habermas's success in fully escaping a passive understanding of the lifeworld in a Bakhtinian sense.

First, even if we accept Cooke's point it is still the case that Habermas views the lifeworld as being a rather fixed and static domain for communication. As he says of the pre-reflective status of the lifeworld: "Single elements, specific taken-for-granteds, are…mobilised in the form of consensual and yet problematizable knowledge only when they become relevant to a situation" (Habermas 1987, p. 124). Such elements are therefore predominantly conceived as being 'unshaken convictions' which are only reflected on during communicative acts. Lifeworld knowledge is thus explored as a "stock of knowledge (which) supplies members with unproblematic, common, background convictions that are assumed to be guaranteed…" (Habermas 1987, p. 125; see also Lecercle 2009, p. 55). Pre-reflective contradictory opinions of the type highlighted by the Bakhtin Circle are subsequently bracketed out of Habermas's analytical oeuvre.

Second, one important presupposition for Habermas's theory of communicative action is that everyone should be allowed to express their true intentions and beliefs and be open about these (see Habermas 1990, pp. 82-83). Amongst other things, Habermas's observations on intention move towards a passive understanding because the "full reproduction of that which is already given in the word" is ascertained by exploring how the word might gain 'greater clarity' (Bakhtin 1981, p. 281). After all, Habermas wants to integrate different words together in speech acts so that they gain greater clarity in a wider discursive system of validity claims. Intentionality, then, is ultimately intentionality towards a discursive system of meaning and not intentionality towards a dialogic and answerable thematic object (cf. Bakhtin 1981, p. 277).

Let us take as an illustration the following communicative exchange based on a regulative speech act presented by Habermas:

Speaker 1: "You are requested to stop smoking".

Hearer-Speaker 2: "Yes, I shall comply" (Habermas 1984, p. 296).

According to Habermas it is the illocutionary nature of speech acts which grounds the propositional content at an intersubjective level between a speaker and a hearer. Both components are necessary for communicative action to transpire. Habermas wants to further suggest that propositional content can be speech act invariant to the extent that a propositional content – "Peter's smoking a pipe" – has the potential to appear in a number of speech acts:

"I assert that Peter smokes a pipe".

"I beg of you (Peter) that you smoke a pipe".

"I ask you (Peter), do you smoke a pipe?"

"I warn you (Peter), smoke a pipe" (Habermas 1979, p. 41).

Even so, Habermas portrays communicative interaction here as being *represented* through clearly demarcated units of speech acts. Yet by breaking down real dialogue into discrete units (e.g. different speech acts) it is not at all clear where the beginning or end of these units occur. And so "(i)f their length is indefinite, which of their segments do we use when we break them down into units?" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 70).

Think momentarily once again about ordinary speech. In everyday life people engaged in dialogue with one another do so in order to transmit information. As was noted in respect to the question of answerability, everyday speech is a mode for the *transmission* of information (Bakhtin 1981, p. 339). But transmission is not merely a linear one way flow of information: from speaker to hearer and then from hearer to speaker. That is to say, in real live speech people do not make clear cut standard statements of the sort Habermas highlights. Speech presented by Habermas therefore often seems to lack dialogic interaction because he creates a substitution in speech by his graphic-schematic representation of discourse through relatively unified speech acts; a graphic-schematic example being "You are requested to stop smoking" (cf. Bakhtin 1986, p. 68). Habermas thus brackets off words from real speech processes and instead conceptualises them as being embedded in relatively unified speech acts and as being uttered by relatively unified individuals. Habermas isolates a graphic-schematic set of speech styles – a specific set of speech acts – and elevates these as being the determining

properties of language as a whole (cf. Bakhtin 1981, pp. 263-266). "One cannot say that these diagrams are false or that they do not correspond to certain aspects of reality. But when they are put forth as the actual whole of speech communication, they become a scientific fiction" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 68). In real live dialogic events there is no singular graphic-schematic representation in which words relate to an object. A theme for example will be infiltrated by a variety of utterances concerning the same object and it is impossible to reduce this to three (or more) singular speech acts. Passive understanding of utterances often results from graphic-schematic representations leading one to posit "an abstract of the actual whole of actively responsive understanding…" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 68).

Finally, and as we saw in the previous section, Habermas usually assumes that speech occurs at a face-to-face level between speaker and hearer so that the *obligation* to provide validity claims also occurs at this level. No necessary reason exists however why the obligation to justify one's claims should be made at a face-to-face level. Indeed, if we take seriously Bakhtin's observation that background language is inherently dialogical then we can begin to investigate how dialogue has the potential to take place between a solitary individual and background language. Or, more precisely, even when alone individuals still nevertheless adopt an attitude towards themselves based within and upon attitudes that others have about them. We are constantly "eavesdropping" on how others are speaking about us even if they are not physically present to us; we think in a dialogic manner by ourselves. For example, we create rejoinders in our mind around conversations with others at events we have had or will be involved with and we intonate specific words with accents in our own mind and this enables us to evaluate past and potential dialogue when we do enter unique empirical events (Bakhtin 1984, pp. 206-208). As Walker (1995, pp. 110-111) indicates, this view of language moves beyond those theorists such as Habermas who tend to emphasise moral consensus building around relatively unified principles. On Bakhtin's estimation, a truly ethical position should pay close attention to the dialogical pervasiveness of a moral background in which one's own 'double-voiced personality' is deeply embedded. As a result, what might appear to be relatively unified principles of validity or morality held by individuals can in fact turn out to be enmeshed in a diverse range of conflicting ethical standpoints palpable

in the most intimate and private spheres of life. Far from providing certainty, the very nature of this dialogical environment frequently makes us unsure or uncertain about our sense of identity. And it is exactly at this moment of uncertainty where we move away from unified principles that we engage forcefully in acts of deliberation.

In the next three sections these points will developed in more depth by focusing on validity claims and their relationship to universalism. It will be argued that while Habermas and the Bakhtin Circle once again share remarkable similarities on their understanding on validity claims there are nevertheless significant differences between them. In particular, each holds a different viewpoint about how validity claims can be said to be 'universal' moments of social interaction. What will be suggested is that the Bakhtin Circle's insistence on universal unrepeatable indeterminacy in dialogue mediated through necessary universal contradictions enables them to argue that 'norms' in language must be based on a notion of answerability.

Validity claims and universalism

In a passage that bears a notable resemblance to Habermas, Bakhtin says:

> Every utterance makes a claim to justice, sincerity, beauty, and truthfulness…And these values of utterances are defined not by their relation to the language (as a purely linguistic system), but by various forms of relation to reality, to the speaking subject and to other…utterances…(Bakhtin 1986, p. 123).

It appears to be the case that Bakhtin is making a similar observation about validity claims to that made by Habermas. On closer inspection, however, there are again noticeable differences between the two. Bakhtin's theory of the utterance suggests that each dialogic event instigates new thematic possibilities within an array of possible genres. There are thus no conventions as such in the sense of settled agreements. In fact, Bakhtin is quite firm in his judgement that utterances create something new and unrepeatable at each dialogic event which, at the same time, generate "some relation to value (the true, the good, the beautiful, and so forth)" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 120). This leads Bakhtin to say that only the utterance establishes a meaningful relationship with other

utterances. "Only an utterance can be faithful (or unfaithful), sincere, true (false), beautiful, just, and so forth" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 122). Bakhtin subsequently reverses Habermas's original schema. It is not validity claims which give utterances normative meaning but is instead the capacity of utterances to give validity claims a meaningful significance in everyday life. Unique and unrepeatable utterances therefore pertain "to honesty, truth, goodness, beauty, history" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 105) to a greater degree than that of validity claims.

However, there are at least two ways in which one sympathetic to Habermas might respond. First, one might be inclined to agree with Hirschkop's view that while Bakhtin alludes to the obligation, or a sense of commitment, one feels towards distinct values in a unique dialogic event, it is also the case that Habermas broadly shares this outlook. That is to say, Habermas, like Bakhtin, believes that discourse places an obligation on interlocutors to take "yes or no positions" by making them give reasons for their arguments (Hirschkop 1999, pp. 210-211).

The second response is to suggest that Habermas provides a complementary way of thinking about norms to that provided by the Bakhtin Circle. For example, to ensure that argumentation in a context of relevance is fair and will be counted as valid to all concerned Habermas suggests that at least two further procedures are required: Discourse (D) and Universalisation (U). (D) is defined by Habermas along the following:

> Only those norms can claim validity that could meet with the acceptance of all concerned in practical discourse (Habermas 1998, p. 41).

(U) is defined by Habermas thus:

> A norm is valid when the foreseeable consequences and side effects of its general observance for the interests and value-orientations of each *individual* could be *jointly* accepted by *all* concerned without coercion (Habermas 1998, p. 42, italics in the original).

In setting out (D) and (U) Habermas is not saying that a universal consensus *must* be reached by participants during a discursive encounter. Instead he is suggesting that the normative *procedures* of argumentation through which a consensus is reached is of

utmost importance – the idea that norms can only be seen as legitimate if all those concerned and who might be affected by the norms in question have freely agreed to their legitimacy. As Moon (1995, pp. 150-151) indicates, these procedures lend credence to Habermas's conviction that practical discourse helps to ascertain which moral norms we should follow and observe as opposed to which values we might pursue. The latter pursuit enters the realm of what constitutes the "good life", which Habermas feels is not the concern of practical discourse as such. However, what constitutes the good life, or at least what allows us to continuously assert our unique different identities despite centralizing monologic tendencies in dialogue, is indeed highlighted by the Bakhtin Circle. One might therefore say that for Habermas universalism is grounded in procedural discourse whereas for the Bakhtin Circle universalism remains dialogically unfinalised (see also Nielsen 2002, pp. 46-47). As such, while they both hold different views on how to conceptualise universalism they are not necessarily incompatible with one another. Habermas allows us to think about moral norms while the Bakhtin Circle allows us to think about what might constitute the good life.

Without doubt, both responses do illustrate similarities between Habermas and the Bakhtin Circle on and around the issues of validity claims and universalism. Be this as it may there are a number of problems with them from a Bakhtinian viewpoint. The first concerns the relationship between obligation and relevance while the second concerns how universalism should be conceptualised.

Obligation and relevance

First, it is questionable whether Bakhtin can in fact be assimilated quite so readily with Habermas's position on the issue of obligation. After all, for Habermas the obligation to give a "yes or no" response arises only when a "context of relevance" is brought within the horizon of taken-for-granted background assumptions. For instance, it might be case that a new worker in an organisation is not yet insured against accidental injury. This issue could then become a context of relevance and subsequently enter the thematic field therein so that workers render problematic this state of affairs through one of three validity claims (Habermas 1987, p. 124). Shifting meanings in a background horizon are

thereby reliant on an explicit moment of relevance, as when something becomes consciously known between participants. Apart from situations like this background assumptions are rarely acknowledged by participants.

But as argued previously this is different to how the Bakhtin Circle conceptualises background language. According to the Bakhtin Circle, background language is constantly in flux to such a degree that 'yes or no' responses are already contained in the multiaccentual nature of utterances irrespective of whether or not they emerge in a context of relevance. Bakhtin is therefore more radical than Habermas on this issue to the extent that he believes that every speech situation carries with it a moment of contingency and indeterminacy because each speech situation is a unique and unrepeatable event (see Bakhtin 1990, p. 118). Norms as such make no sense in the 'abstract' but only become meaningful through each dialogic event in which refracted concrete utterances live and breathe. Even a norm that encourages discussion between individuals about particular concrete utterances is in danger of smothering the contingency and indeterminacy at an event. This is because a norm is often simply "a verbal form for conveying the adaptation of certain theoretical propositions to a particular end" (Bakhtin 1993, p. 24); or, in Habermasian terms, it is a validity claim which proscribes ways of acting in an empirical situation.

Habermas might very well argue that his validity claims merely refer to argumentative procedures and not to Kantian a priori duties of 'ought'. Yet it is still nevertheless the case that his validity claims proscribe specific theoretical propositions onto unique dialogic events ensuring that an ethical ought "is tacked on from the outside" to dialogic events (Bakhtin 1993, p. 23). Habermas's ideal speech situation thus acts as a stable and self-equivalent 'signal' to speakers. In this respect the ideal speech situation is a *technical device* that allows speakers to recognise each other's shared *identity* in the sense of sharing an identity through the same validity claims. But this will not necessarily elicit understanding between speakers because it is not inevitable that speakers will recognise the concrete uniqueness of one another through validity claims. After all, validity claims for Habermas have a special relationship with speech acts, and yet for the Bakhtin Circle only an utterance, and not therefore a speech act, has the potential to create understanding. Only an utterance moves beyond fixed identity in order to

illuminate the unrepeatable novelty of a dialogic event, which will then lend itself to understanding between speakers (Voloshinov 1973, p. 68). Hence, 'ought' for Bakhtin can only meaningfully exist as ought-as-event, or as Being-as-event. If this is true then abstract categories gain validity in a once-occurrent dialogic event where they enter into an essential relationship with emotional-volitional valuations embodied in utterances (Bakhtin 1993, p. 33).

Dialectical universalism

This brings us to the second and perhaps more controversial point. The Bakhtin Circle encourages us to situate dialogue in a universal moment mediated through *dialectical* processes and social relations. The reason why this is a somewhat controversial statement to make is that Bakhtin is often seen even by Bakhtinians to advocate an anti-dialectical social theory. Morson and Emerson (1990), for example, argue that Bakhtin was hostile to dialectical thinking, not least because "(d)ialectics abstracts the dialogic from dialogue" because it aims to reduce concrete, creative and inventive utterances to reified teleological systems (Morson and Emerson 1990, p. 57). More generally, it is argued that the sort of dialogical outlook favoured by Bakhtin precludes the monological tendencies evident in dialectical thinking. Dialectics finalises dialogic exchange to the extent that it posits a universal logical sequence of self-development through to the inevitable realisation of a perfect final form. No one consciousness can thereby claim the dialectic as its own and incorporate it into their unique personality because the dialectic dissolves concrete specificity into one all-embracing system (Nikulin 2006, pp. 149-151). Conversely, dialogical thinking seeks to recapture this sense of concrete specificity from the dialectic through the idea of the unrepeatable utterance.

There is of course some textual evidence for this view of dialectics in Bakhtin's work. Resolute in his rejection of dialectical readings of his hero, Dostoevsky, Bakhtin says of the great Russian novelist that while oppositions can be detected in his literary works these do not imply that a Hegelian dialectical spirit is also present. Dostoevsky writes about the contradictory and pluralistic relationship amongst many consciousnesses which never find resolution "in the unity of an evolving spirit" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 26).

Indeed, such a unified spirit is essentially a monologic way of writing exactly because it suffocates interacting dialogic personalities (Bakhtin 1984, pp. 26-27; see also, pp. 30-31). But does this also imply as some suggest it does that Bakhtin rejects all dialectical thinking?

As can be noted from the quotes just given, Bakhtin (1984) is quite rightly critical of idealist elements in Hegelian dialectics. But just a few paragraphs later after his admonishment of idealist dialectics Bakhtin sets out the theoretical standpoint he prefers; a standpoint which can conceivably be described as materialist dialectics. According to Bakhtin, one of the problems with the idealist dialectic is that it reduces material contradictions evident in social life to the spiritual lives of individuals. It then incorporates this subjectivism into a unified dialectically evolving spirit which moves through a linear trajectory of historical stages. For Bakhtin, we need to place this dialectic back in "the objective social world" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 27). In practice this involves viewing the social world as being complexly stratified through different interacting societal levels and as being mediated by various contradictory relationships. A creative author is thus one who comprehends "the extensive and well-developed contradictions which (co-exist) among people – among people, not among ideas in a single consciousness" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 27). To recognise the reality of these objective contradictions implies moving beyond subjectivity and its relationship to a linear evolutionary theory of history in favour of "the visualization of contradictions as forces coexisting simultaneously…" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 28). This is to embrace a dialectical philosophy and sociology of internal relations whereby different universal material contradictions of a system are refracted into one another in often contingent and unpredictable ways to produce new dialogic events in particular contexts (see Bakhtin 1984, p. 202). Two further points can be made in this respect.

In the first instance, and as has already been pointed out in previous sections and by others (e.g. Côté 2000; Dop 2000; Roberts 2004b), the Bakhtin Circle clearly believes that each concrete context refracts the complexity and contradictions of social life at different levels of abstraction (see Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978, p. 14). More precisely, they argue that a concrete context refracts the determinations of 1) contradictory socioeconomic relations mediated through an exploitative division of labour such as that

which exists in capitalism between capital and labour, which are themselves refracted in 2) contradictory social relations evident in other social forms, that in turn react back upon socioeconomic relations (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978, p. 18; see also Marx 1966, p. 791). This dialectical position thus suggests that a *particular* concrete context internalises and refracts historically specific *universal* social relations.

Working in part from a Bakhtinian perspective, Engeström (1987) for example observes that historically specific universal contradictions are reproduced at various concrete levels in capitalist societies. Engeström illustrates this point with the example of a doctor. In his or her surgery a doctor will obviously make use of work instruments such as prescription drugs. At the same time the doctor has to contend with the commodification of these instruments. Drugs for example are manufactured by corporate drug companies and sold for profit, while health services become increasingly subject to market mechanisms and to profit margins.[3] Engeström (1987) argues that these 'primary contradictions' (that is, contradictions directly associated with commodification and pressures associated with the extraction of surplus value and profit) are reproduced as more concrete 'secondary contradictions'. In the case of doctors, as Foot and Groleau (2011) suggest, a secondary contradiction could manifest itself as a pressure to see more patients in less time in order to tackle increasing market pressures imposed by politicians on GP surgeries. A doctor thus faces the secondary contradiction of having to allocate less time to patients and more time to overseeing the daily business costs of running a surgery. To combat this secondary contradiction a new set of practices are implemented. Perhaps new administrators or new doctors are hired. However, these new employees might start to implement their own practices that explicitly criticise the increasing use of market mechanisms at this particular GP surgery. But these practices contradict market ideologies of private insurance companies that work with the surgery, and so on. The point to make from this example is that the particularity of a concrete context (a doctor's surgery) refracts in its identity (in its social form) those historically specific contradictions associated with universal exploitative capitalist social relations (see Jones

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[3] For a brilliant expose of the privatisation of the UK's National Health Service see Leys and Player (2011).

2009). As such a concrete context will internalise and reproduce existing and new contradictions that will also become enmeshed in dialogue.

In the second instance, and following the previous point, the Bakhtin Circle argues that it is crucial to make "concrete material reality" the primary area of research (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978, p. 12). This is because one needs to understand how an object of analysis gains its unique refracted identity not only through abstract meanings but more importantly through concrete ideological and social meaning gained through dialogic events. In other words, refracted concrete dialogic events are the medium through which more abstract universal contradictory social relations become meaningful for ordinary people (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978, pp. 8-9). Given this, we arrive at a second meaning of universalism for the Bakhtin Circle, which refers primarily to the "universalism of contextual meaning…" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 145). This second meaning of universalism is related with the first meaning – abstract universal systemic contradictions – because 1) abstract universal contradictions must try to surpass and transgress their inherent limitations across the concrete forms of the system as a whole, so that 2) interrelated concrete forms constantly undergo an "active dialectical process of generation" (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978, p. 14) as contradictions endeavour to overcome their inherent limitations. Subsequently, it is at concrete dialogic events that ordinary people experience first hand, and can communicate with one another about, the effects of more abstract contradictions. Indeed, Bakhtin suggests that speakers should aim to transform an abstract "thinglike environment" into a concrete semantic context – or dialogic event – so that they might then think of ways to overcome specific contradictions which confront them and which limit their own potentials.

What the Bakhtin Circle therefore attempts to convince us of is that dialogic relations become a truly participative activity when both senses of universalism come together as "actual, once-occurrent" Being-as-event (Bakhtin 1993, p. 15). At this moment speakers through dialogue with one another make themselves answerable to specific historical contradictions and they make these contradictions answerable to their own unique personality and lived experienced. Consensus based on (U) – Habermas's standpoint – leads to a lack of uniqueness and to a loss of Being-as-event because historical specificity is dissolved through abstract validity claims ("possible Being"). This

also leads to the emergence of second-hand truths because utterances emerge from an outside and final source of validity (Bakhtin 1984, pp. 55-59). For Bakhtin, dialogic truth should instead be a participative act that has "never existed before and can never be repeated… and constitutes an answerable continuation in the spirit of the whole…" (Bakhtin 1993, p. 40). 'Truth' is being in a contingent space in order to comprehend how a specific range of utterances are connected to a whole array of other answerable utterances and languages in a systemic historical whole. As Garvey (2000, p. 382) makes clear, Bakhtin (1981, p. 296) insists that the recognition of one's own utterances being enmeshed in a complex mediation of "internally variegated languages" creates a basis to critically reflect on the systems, or concrete whole, of dialogue that affect the way we view the world.

Conclusion

Cooke has suggested that critics such as Benhabib who claim that Habermas neglects a concrete level of analysis have misinterpreted the rationale of the Habermasian enterprise. Accordingly Habermas's theory of argumentation demonstrates that participants "must be willing (in principle) to consider the arguments of *everyone*, no matter how poorly they are articulated, and to attach (in principle) equal weight to these arguments" (Cooke 1994, p. 160, italics in the original). Argumentation must therefore consider and respect the views of others in reaching a consensus. "This means, on the one hand, a recognition of everyone's equal entitlement to introduce new topics into discussion and to express needs and desires and, on the other, a willingness to confront the arguments of others in a fair and unbiased way" (Cooke 1994, p. 160). Each participant should be guided by universal moral respect for the other's argument and by egalitarian reciprocity. In itself this does not constitute a set of transcendentally binding norms of action but instead constitutes a set of argumentative duties and rights within the parameters of a discourse (Habermas 1998, pp. 44-45). As Cooke goes on to observe, such principles are not as Benhabib and other critics maintain moral arguments but are the very presuppositions of argumentation. In other words, these principles create a way of assessing the *conduct* of argumentation and not the arguments themselves. And so, for

example, "judgements cannot be criticized on the basis of the knowledge they embody; they can be criticized only on the basis of the way in which they are reached" (Cooke 1994, p. 161; see also White 1988, pp. 73-74).

Cooke's response to the critics on this point is both illuminating and important. Certainly it forcibly highlights a concrete procedural moment in Habermas's theory of communicative action; a moment which is often overlooked by his critics. However, this paper has suggested that Habermas's theory of discourse is found wanting from a Bakhtinian perspective. According to the Bakhtin Circle dialogue can take one of two forms (Kent 1993, pp. 152-153). First, there is dialogue premised on face-to-face encounters between speakers and hearers (Voloshinov 1973, p. 95). Often dialogue in this instance is studied through distinctive "compositional forms" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 279) such as through speech acts. Second, however, there exists dialogism and this more dynamic use of language explores how single utterances are "*only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication*" (Voloshinov 1973, p. 95, italics in the original). By this observation Voloshinov means that dialogism exists at different levels of abstraction in the "all-inclusive, generative process of a given social collective" (Voloshinov 1973, p. 95). Concrete utterances internalise and refract both verbal and non-verbal social processes, which is why Voloshinov is adamant that dialogism can accompany a whole host of dialogic interaction: face-to-face communication, a book, surveys, media, performance art, and so on. Dialogic events, or the utterance as a whole as the Bakhtin Circle also term them, consist precisely in examining utterances in such a way

In many respects Habermas can be said to study discourse rather than dialogism. Habermas is more interested in the first type of dialogue, namely the compositional form of speech. From a Bakhtinian perspective while such an approach does open up important and interesting avenues to study language it also tends to study discourse at the level of clarity – being clear about speech acts and validity claims – rather than at the level of refracted utterances and dialogism (cf. Bakhtin 1981, p. 280). For the Bakhtin Circle, procedural democracy must at a minimum work in synthesis with faithfulness towards the fullness of the dialogic event (Bakhtin 1993, p. 38). This means being faithful not only to procedural principles such as "the contentual constancy of a principle, of a right, of a law,

and even less so of being" (Bakhtin 1993, p. 38) but also implies being faithful to the whole uniqueness of answerable and unrepeatable concrete dialogic acts.

Unsurprisingly therefore Bakhtin rejects those discursive approaches – as exemplified by a Habermasian perspective – which "think that truth (*pravda*) can only be the truth (*istina*) that is composed of universal moments; that the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable and constant in it" (Bakhtin 1993, p. 37). On the contrary, and as Nikulin (2006, pp. 220-221) observes, the Bakhtin Circle reject theories of language that overly stress the importance of what is repeatable and thus trans-historically universal because this leads to the *telos* of reaching a consensus. The Bakhtin Circle is more interested in the unfinalizable nature of dialogue, how one's self as both a person and other is dialogically entwined in the other of others and entwined in a series of concrete mediations, and how we understand these processes in and through dialogue itself. Agreement and understanding between interlocutors is first and foremost agreement on the unfinalizability of dialogue. Consensus may result from unfinalizability but it is not a necessity (see also Koczanowicz 2011).

. A further advantage of this standpoint is that it is attuned to the contingency of hegemonic power relations to the extent that it questions the supposed completed form that a socially constructed consensus must assume. Bakhtinian ideas about utterances forces us to critically analyse the constitution of concrete dialogic events including how socio-ideological contradictions come to be stabilised over time into a consensus which benefits some to the detriment of others (see Steinberg 1998, p. 858). If one of the original intentions of early Critical Theory in the guise of Adorno, et al. was "to challenge the very requirement of any moral universalism from the particular" (Morris 2001, p. 157) then the Bakhtin Circle can be said to share many similarities with these early theorists than with Habermas.

Acknowledgements

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