ABSTRACT: Our classical mode of intellectual inquiry, centered in theory formulation and argumentative critique, is compared with Voloshinov’s participatory, dialogically-structured mode of inquiry. It is shown that theory critique is concerned with comparing merely ‘views’ or ‘perspectives’, rather than with whole ‘forms of life’, along with their different responsive relations to their surroundings. It commits us also to a particular kind of (classical) reality, one that we can only think of in terms of assemblies of externally related, objective parts and mechanical processes of productivity – the genuine creation of novelty is impossible within such a reality. Within it also, people’s spontaneous, living, dialogically-structured, bodily expressed responses to both the others and othernesses around them are ignored. Voloshinov, however, emphasizes such events. His central focus is on what occurs within those moments when two or more beings come into living, responsive contact with each other. In those moments of relationally-responsive activity, not only is there the continuous creation of novelty, but we must think of them as occasioning a very different kind of reality. Rather than an amalgam of externally related parts, they constitute an indivisible whole of internally related parts. Indeed, we ourselves become participant parts in an unbroken flow of spontaneously responsive communicative activity, in our culture and language, both playing a part in, and partaking from it. Treating language in this fashion, as internally related to our lives together at large, is very different from our treatment of it as an object of thought, as in the classical approach. The implications of responding to it in this way are explored in the article.

“If we were to look at language in a truly objective way - from the side, so to speak, or more accurately, from above it, we would discover no inert system of self-identical norms. Instead, we would find ourselves witnessing the ceaseless generation of language norms” (Voloshinov, 1986, p.66).

“... disorder is a part of philosophy, which finds in it the means of creating its unity through digression and returned to the center. Its unity is that of a landscape or discourse, where everything is indirectly linked by secret references to a center of interest or central prospective which no guideline marks out in advance” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.132).

“For we are under the illusion that what is sublime, what is essential, about our investigation consists in grasping one comprehensive essence” (Wittgenstein. 1981, no.444).

“... understanding is a response to a sign with signs” (Voloshinov, 1986, p.11).

“The reality of the word, as is true of any sign, resides between individuals...” (Voloshinov, 1986, p.14).

“Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead, is not the same. All our reactions are different” (Wittgenstein, 1953, no.284).
How should we conduct our inquiries into human communication and into the role played in it by language? Voloshinov (1986) assumes that a philosophical inquiry is required, and he begins with the following set of questions: “What, in fact, is the subject matter of the philosophy of language? Where are we to find it? What is its concrete, material existence like? By what method or methods can we come to grips with its mode of existence?... What is language, and what is word?” (p.45). But what kind of philosophical inquiry does Voloshinov have in mind? And is a philosophical inquiry as such required here at all? Do we really need to ask ourselves what we mean by our talk of language, of words, do we need to question the kinds of things we are referring to in such talk? Surely, in some sense – in a vague and fragmentary, unformulated sense perhaps – don’t we already know the answers to the questions Voloshinov raises? Do we really still lack the concepts appropriate to an inquiry into the nature of language? For, after all, it is not as if words and the use of language is unfamiliar to us. And in any case, aren’t all our social practices (with language as the paradigm example) to be understood as made up of actions performed by agents following, in some sense, an orderly structure of rules (see Giddens, 1979, for an extensive account of this view of our social practices)? How else might we understand them, if not in this manner? Thus, for those of us working in the human and social sciences, if we want to arrive at explicit answers to questions such as Voloshinov’s which are acceptable to all, isn’t it simply a matter of drawing on the tacit knowledge of linguistic matters we already possess in structuring possible theoretical formulations, and in an atmosphere of rational criticism and debate, to winnow out the most adequate answers from the rest? Surely, there is no need to inquire further into methods appropriate to such an inquiry. What other method than theory formulation and theory critique might there be?

Clearly, within our inquiries within the communication discipline – whether it is in the field of cultural studies, interpersonal relations, conversational analysis, discursive psychology, media studies, rhetorical studies, or whatever else it may be – we take this method for granted. We begin our inquiries by simply addressing the facts of language use and structure already known to us. We then move on to formulate speculative theories to explain them, to explain our linguistic practices. Once we know the rules being followed by, or being used in some other way, by social actors in structuring their behavior, so it is believed, we will then be able to explain it, i.e., to claim to know the reasons for people acting as they do, and to justify our claims. While a continual critique of mistaken views will, eventually, we feel, leave us following the right path, leave us with a correct version of what the rules of our linguistic practices must be. Even in current times, as the realization has grown amongst many of us, that the creative, constitutive powers of language are more important that its powers of representation, there is still the feeling that rational debate and critique of each other’s theories will carry us through to our goal. Recourse to a philosophical inquiry seems unnecessary. What further could we learn from it that a clear, agreed, and comprehensive theoretical account of language, and of its role in our lives, could not also provide?

In this article, I shall call this the classical view. It leads us to adopt, not only a certain view of what constitutes a proper form of inquiry, but also, a certain view of the circumstances surrounding its conduct. In what follows below, I want both to criticize this approach and to offer a radical alternative to it. My critique is radical, in that I do not want to disagree with this view as a prelude to offering an alternative view, but to disagree with the whole idea that our intellectual lives should revolve around arguments about views. Instead, following Wittgenstein (1953, 1969), I want to suggest an altogether different kind of endeavor: rather than rooting our inquiries solely in one or another kind of seeing, we should root them within one or another “form of life.” In other words, rather than treating ourselves as uninvolved, disinterested subjects, merely observing our surroundings objectively, we must take into account the inescapable fact of our spontaneous, relational engagements with them. All our seeings, knowings, understandings, and actings are always from within a particular set of living relations to the others and othernesses around us1.

What I want to suggest below, is that Voloshinov’s dialogically-structured, participatory approach to intellectual inquiry provides us with a significant example of just such a new way of conducting our intellectual inquiries. Its nature, however, is exhibited throughout the structure of his text. In being spontaneously responsive, I think, to his own notion of what it is for events to be related to each other dialogically, he does not structure his text in this way deliberately; the style of his inquiry is implicit in his writing; it is displayed, I think, in an unplanned way as it unfolds. In what follows below, I want to draw attention to it explicitly, for it is, I think, an important style of inquiry quite different from our current, official forms.

Compared with our official, classical forms of inquiry, Voloshinov exhibits in his text a much more exploratory, less instrumental, form of inquiry, one much more suited to the unstable, diverse, pluralistic world

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into which we have moved in recent times. For in it, rather than solely in eliminative debate as to views, protagonists are related to each other in a richer, much more nuanced fashion. Indeed, in line with the distinction drawn by Richard Rorty (1979) between edifying and systematic philosophy, rather than providing an accurate and orderly representation of something already there (as in a systematic philosophy), Voloshinov achieves even more, something quite foreign to the classical approach. He succeeds, I suggest, in keeping “a space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause – wonder that there is something new under the sun... something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described” (Rorty, 1979, p.370). He does this, not by debating the merits of different representational views or positions (stated as static propositional forms as to “how things are”), but by bringing in his dialogical form of inquiry the different “voices” of different views or positions into living, responsive contact with each other. In meeting each other is this living way, not solely as antagonists but as “conversational partners” (Rorty, 1979, p.372), as we shall see, something is created which cannot be brought into existence in any other way.

By placing himself in a dialogical relation to other workers in the philosophy of language in this way, not only allows Voloshinov to be appreciative (as well as still being critical) of previous approaches, but also to do something else of even greater importance. In his dialogical mode of inquiry, after having set out the general circumstances of the context within which they all must meet each other, he arranges the two most prominent ‘voices’ to date in the philosophy of language – “individualistic subjectivism [IS]” (romantic) and “abstract objectivism [AO]” (modernist) – to be as if both in conversation with each other, and with him. This also allows readers encountering these voices, and their temporal sequencing in his text, to appreciate that the two ‘views’ initial views of IS and AO are, in fact, interim responses to each other, in a conversation of a still ongoing, unfinished kind. Indeed, it allows readers to create in their reading of Voloshinov’s text, a sense of a third, more complex, dynamic reality, in which both IS and AO are the case. As participants within Voloshinov’s staged conversation, we as readers, in imaginatively playing out this dialogue within ourselves, along with Voloshinov, can arrive at a shared and unified, but still open, i.e., only partially specified, sense of what language is, of what word is. Thus, rather than facing an either-or choice, between two static, finished, and entirely separate structures, with Voloshinov’s own ‘system’ as a third, we can (as readers) appreciate all the claims made as dialogically related to each other, as both pre- or proto-theoretical utterances responsive in their own different ways to the same, and still in fact unfinished, complex reality. The partially specified unity we arrive at in the process is a “felt” unity, a unified “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977), within which all in the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) projected in Voloshinov’s writing can participate in its further development.

**What theory critique and debate misses**

*From representations to responsiveness*

Voloshinov’s central focus, is on the importance of our spontaneous, living, bodily responsiveness to each other - a responsiveness that, due to its living nature, always exhibits both an anticipatory aspect, an orientation toward the future as well as a retrospective aspect, a remembering in some sense of the past. Thus rather than with our minds, Voloshinov begins with our bodies. Clearly, this is in marked contrast to the central concern of the classical approach with mental representations, with shapes, patterns, forms, and structures, with regularities, with consciousness, thought, and sense perception. Indeed, he goes further. For him, much of our language use is not a matter of regularity or repetition, not a matter of us consciously (or unconsciously) following rules or norms (as the first epigraph quote suggests). He wants to consider language, not as a pattern of already spoken words, but as something to do with words in their speaking. He wants to study it, not as something over and done with that can now be considered as a structured object of thought, but as at an earlier point in time, when the very voicing of an utterance, or its responsive understanding, is still in progress. When understood in this way, from within the unfolding process of verbal interaction, in the course of its conduct, it becomes clear that our knowledge of linguistic structure, in terms of rules and norms, rather than the source of the order observable in our verbal performances, emerges as a consequence of our use of language. The order of our spontaneous mutual responsiveness is always there first, working creatively in the background to everything we do. Our understandings, practically, initially and primarily arise out of our spontaneous, future-oriented responses to events occurring around us.

Rather than basing our claims to knowledge solely in theory-guided observations of our surroundings, then, our claims to knowledge must take our living relations to our surroundings into account in some way.
Until recently, however, the influence of our living relations to our surroundings in our inquiries has been, as we shall see, ignored. For, although its influence may be ‘shown’ or ‘displayed’ in the ways in which it ‘shapes’ everything we do or say, it cannot be explicitly observed. As an unnoticed background to all our activities, it presence is only a felt presence, a shaped and vectored sense that we can often share with others as to where our actions have come from, and to where they should or might move next.

As we shall see, this switch in primary focus, away from attending to forms and patterns observed, externally, from a distance, toward attending to only partially formed ‘senses’ felt from within our active involvements with the others and othernesses around us, is more than just a narrow issue, to do solely with the academic study of language. It constitutes a major change in our attitudes both toward our surroundings and toward ourselves. In bringing to our attention the way in which the spontaneous flow of responsive activity between us all is constitutive of who and what we are as human beings, Voloshinov invites us to participate in a total switch in the western way of talking and thinking of ourselves and our world. Classically, our concern has been with saying how things are for us as subjects, for it arose out of a concern with how we could, solely as deliberately acting individuals, make things happen. In Voloshinov’s dialogically-structured world of living, responsive relations, however, we find ourselves related to our circumstances differently. We find them not set over against us as an external reality, but as literally our circumstances, i.e., as both constituted by us (as members of a linguistic group) in our terms, and as constitutive of us, as the kind of people we are. We have our being within them. We do not just see surroundings passively, as a set of material things, as objects, over there, with their own independent, isolated ‘local’ natures, regardless of our either relations to them or of their relations to the rest of their surroundings. We see our surroundings actively, from within one or another ongoing active involvement with them, in what I shall call from now on, a relationally-responsive manner. In such a new way of seeing as this, everything changes: what we understand by the terms language, word, utterance, speaking, listening, interaction, communication, understanding, meaning, seeing (viewing), and many, many other central terms in the human and social sciences, come to be seen in a new light.

We can no longer simply take our own individual, speculative thoughts about a phenomenon, and claim that the single aspect upon which we have alighted, is an aspect of central importance. We can no longer accept that our task is simply that of discovering an order (the one true order) behind appearances. We must now view everything (every ‘thing’) relationally, as an internal ‘part’ of a particular, dynamically developing, complexly intertwined, and possibly contradictory, living whole, a whole within which we ourselves are involved. Rather than anchoring our conceptual claims about language in realities out there in the world in space and in time, as if we can have a view of it as an object in itself, we must now turn such claims back, so to speak, to root them within the very circumstances from out of which they issue. If we attempt to reduce language to “a compact subject-matter complex of definite and inspectable dimensions, we forfeit the very essence of the thing we are studying,” says Voloshinov (1986, p.46). Not only must we take the contradictory, fluid reality of language seriously and not try to simplify or circumvent it, but we must also take seriously our own relational involvements with our surroundings and the ‘rooting’ of our talk in these relations. Different ways of viewing and talking about features in our surroundings arise out of our different ways of relating ourselves to them; they are an inseparable part of what we see and feel able to speak ‘about’ in our talk. All that we can say about what its ‘local’ nature may be, in itself, irrespective of our involvements in it and with it, is that it must, on the one hand, be of sufficient specificity to frustrate certain of our attempted ways of relating ourselves to it, and of sufficient complexity as to allow many different (and sometimes seemingly quite contradictory) such ways.

We can turn to an examination of how critiques and debates about language have been played out in recent times to understand the complexity of what is involved here. Crucial in our considerations of these debates is the influence of the “pictures,” as Wittgenstein (1953) calls them, which dwell in our language and which language repeats to us “inexorably” (no.115). For such pictures can often mislead us. These pictures lie in the character of “the background” that supposedly rational debates seems to invite. As we shall see, it is the constitutive role of the usually unnoticed “background” (Searle, 1989; Taylor, 1995; and Dreyfus, 1991) that is crucial both here, and in coming to a grasp of what is so special in Voloshinov’s participatory mode of inquiry. The character of the background is not easy to grasp, for, as the condition of our intelligible discussions with each other, we cannot simply turn it around to make it a topic of them.

Critiques and debates about language often begin with criticisms of previous approaches, not simply to do with how they are wrong, but with what they miss or with how they are inadequate. They then go on to make claims as to how the current approach overcomes such difficulties. Chomsky (1968), for instance, justified his
own turn toward the study of syntactic structures by claiming that “we must study and isolate the system of linguistic competence that underlies behavior. And this system of linguistic competence is qualitatively different from anything that can be described in terms of the taxonomic methods of structural linguistics, the concepts of S-R psychology, or the notions developed within the mathematical theory of communication or the theory of simple automata” (p.4). For a secure foundation upon which to build a scientifically respectable linguistics, he turned to Saussure’s (1911/1959) concept of *langue* (our idealized knowledge of the language system), agreeing with Saussure that speech (parole), our observable linguistic performances, are too heterogeneous and disorderly for proper study. Others, however, have disagreed. They claimed that the sequencing observable in our naturally occurring utterances is highly orderly and that it should therefore be studied (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Schegloff, 1982, 1988, 1995; Ochs, Schegloff, and Thompson, 1996). And just as Chomsky justified his own approach by criticizing its most notable forerunners, so those who have turned to what they call “Discourse Analysis” justify their turn by criticizing him. After noting that Chomsky studied only idealized speech data, Potter and Wetherell (1987), for instance, criticized him thus: “The problem is not idealizations per se; after all, Newton’s laws of mechanics are exact only for frictionless environments. The worry is that the idealizations Chomsky uses miss essential features of natural speech and informal everyday conversations” (p.11).

Here then, as in many other instances, workers act as if the differences between them can be settled by critical analysis, debate, and argument. But in conducting such debates, not only do we make a number of characteristic moves, we also make a number of characteristic assumptions. Central among the moves we make, is negative critique (along with, quite often, denigratory remarks impugning our opponent’s intelligence and/or character). So anxious are we to gain a place in the sun for our own work that we make little attempt to appreciate the positive reasons for an opponent’s proposals. Elsewhere (Shotter, 1997), I have explored the kind of textual violence to which this gives rise in academe, and its effects. Here, however, I want to explore the characteristic “background” assumptions that sanction such claimed rational forms of argument and debate. For, rather than the mere critical comparison of competing *theories*, at stake here is the whole taken-for-granted background, systematic atmosphere structuring our conduct of our inquiries. I want to explore the nature of this background in three steps.

The classical view

First, to put the matter initially in simple terms (and to make the argumentative move of inadequacy myself), let me claim that all the argumentatively structured methods of inquiry currently available to us in our academic disciplines (with their associated theoretical discourses) are limited in their aims. As a consequence of adhering to their own self-proclaimed standards of what it is to be rational, rather than being concerned with both extending the range of our experience, and with reducing it to order, workers seem to be concerned solely with the latter. So, although they may argue about qualitative inadequacies – as indeed, both Chomsky and his critics do above – they all seek to express their concerns in the same way: namely, in terms of a systematic representation of a supposed subject matter, a representation of it that, moreover, can be grasped in a ‘picture’ by an individual listener or reader. In other words, they all move to a form of expression and way of seeing that is essentially quantitative, i.e., in terms of assemblies which are seen as constituted of parts externally related to each other. The internal relations between the participant parts of an ongoing flow of activity are ignored within this way of looking.

The role of static pictures in the classical approach cannot be over emphasized. We feel that unless speakers can in a self-aware way to talk ‘about’ a represented object, they do not know what they are talking about. They must use it as a single, coherent and consistent source for their claims to knowledge; and listeners or readers (supporters and critics alike) must be able ‘to get it’. They be able while still in the seminar room or conference hall, or while reading at their desk, to feel that they have understood the speaker’s idea completely, to have got ‘the picture’ too. Indeed, all in academia feel that there is a common arena within which all theoretical entities, as putative self-contained “elements of reality,” can make an appearance and their properties be critically appraised. Thus, just as Chomsky assumes that he can ‘see’ the properties of what he is talking about when he criticizes entities in other theories (in taxonomic structural linguistics and S-R psychology, etc.), so those who criticize him also assume that they can ‘see’ the properties of crucial entities in his theories.

This assumption – that we understand (i.e., see) another’s idea by duplicating what it ‘pictures’, so to
speak, in our own heads – leads on to a number of others: One is that our knowledge of something is only properly rational and complete if we can completely picture (i.e., see) it, that is, if we can grasp it in terms of a structure of rationally ordered elements with what might be called a single order of connectedness to them. This leads on to another: that to constitute such a structure, as we have already noted, the self-contained elements must be linked by a set of external relations’, i.e., a set of relations with their own attributes that do not affect the character of the elements in themselves. We can call such a set of relations “rules.” For, even if we cannot get a view of a whole structure ‘all at once’, if we can describe it in terms of a set of elements and a set of rules for all their possible combinations, this is counted as equivalent to being able to ‘see’ the whole structure, to ‘getting a picture’ of it. Thus, even those who criticize Chomsky for ignoring how people’s utterances are sequentially linked to each other – in being both responsive to a previous utterance and making relevant a next utterance – still all seek to describe the outcome of their investigations in terms of something like a system of rules, e.g., as a grammar or a syntax, that an individual investigator can ‘picture’. To grasp a ‘view’ of something is to possess a sense of it as a spatially arrayed structure of elements joined by a set of specifiable relations.

All this then leads on to another assumption that is currently central to all of social scientific inquiry: that such a system of rules, a grammar, or whatever, must exist (as an organizing device) separate from our practical activities to give them their shape or structure. Such a system can thus be discovered as an entity (or a device) in a reality made up of entities. Thus, for example, Schegloff (1996), having taken “turns-at-talk” as the “home environment” in which to study people’s utterances’, goes on to suggest that, “the one (or one) key unit of language organization for talk-in-interaction is the turn constructional unit [i.e., what others might call ‘an utterance’- js]; its natural habitat is the turn-at-talk; its organization we are calling ‘grammar’. And we are beginning with the premise that grammar as an organizing device is expectably formed up by reference to the habitat, ‘the turn’” (p.55).

Now, we shall find below, that Voloshinov moves a similar move to Schegloff’s here. He also locates the influences shaping our utterances in momentary events of dialogically-structured interaction, in what we might call “the interactive moment.” But Schegloff’s move – to attribute the order observable in our practical social activities to a separate and discoverable “organizing device” – renders at least the following three features of our social lives together rationally invisible to us: (1) It obscures the multidimensional yet incomplete orders of connectedness present to us in our lived experience of language in use, along with its openness to the creation of yet further such orders. (2) With its emphasis on regularity and repetition, it also obscures the continual occurrence within it of once-off or first-time, novel events – events which not only make it possible for us to express and respond to unique features both in our own and in each other’s lives, but which might also presage the beginning of utterly new forms of social life between us. (3) In representing people’s social practices as constituted by an influence flowing from a single sovereign source, the distributed influences on them from their embedding within the ceaseless flow of relationally-responsive activity, spontaneously originating and unfolding throughout the living, embodied relations occurring between them and the others and othernesses around them, is also obscured. Why do we persist in such an aim? Why do we still talk as if it is possible to base our use of language in a structure that can be described from a position outside of, an prior to, all its particular uses? Why do we still seek structures ordered by single central sources of order?

The answer, I think – and this is the third step I want to take – can be found in the fact that the classical view of the world, as I called it above, is built into almost all our daily dealings with each other, at least into those in which we are concerned with ‘getting things done’. It is a ‘view’ of the world – and its pictorial quality is one of its most significant features – which is embodied in the very structure of our common sense talk, not only of our sensible relations to our surroundings, but also to our own activities. “In the language-game which is its original home” (Wittgenstein, 1953, no.116), such a use of language does no harm. Indeed, for us as individual autonomous subjects looking out on an objective world, it works well. But there is, as we will note further below, an almost irresistible tendency to use words, originally learnt and used to describe matters easily open to observation by all, to talk ‘about’ the nature of inner, mental events, as if the general structure of our ‘inner lives’ is identical to that of the external world around us – as if it too could be captured in a picture. Thus if we do, so to speak, catch a glimpse of our mental activities while in motion, and succeed for a while in speaking or thinking of them in a new, non-classical way, we find it difficult to sustain the effort. A non-sensory form of perception is required, the felt sense of an unfolding relational structure, a shaped and vectored sense of, given one’s position, of where one might move next. We can only attend to it in brief, fragmentary, and isolated moments, while making a self-conscious effort to do so. Otherwise, in our more spontaneous moments, we lapse
back to our ‘official’ (classical) everyday forms of thought and talk, i.e., those forms of talk appropriate in our manipulation of ‘things’, the language of information, as we might call it.

As Wittgenstein (1980, I) remarks about the nature of the difficulty here, “the facts of human history that throw light on our problem, are difficult for us to find out, for our talk passes them by, it is occupied with other things” (no.78). To move to an extent away from the aim of getting things done, and toward the poetic task of keeping “a space open for wonder,” is to allow ourselves to be amazed at how in fact we do do the things we do: How, for example, do we recognize in the smile and gait of a person approaching us, someone to be wary of and to be responded to with caution? We use, suggests Wittgenstein (1953) “imponderable evidence,” that is evidence which “includes subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone” (p.228), evidence that we are often quite incapable of describing in terms of well-known categories.

If we are to allow ourselves to be amazed in this way, to approach our own activities with an appropriate respect for their subtle and nuanced complexities, while resisting the urge to bring them to (or impose on them) an order of our own devising, then we must make ourselves more aware of how the language of information in the classical view biases all our thinking and acting. To do this, however, we do not need a wholesale replacement of classical concepts (which, in any case, it is next to impossible to do ‘in one leap’, so to speak), for, to repeat, these are the concepts within which we all conduct our daily affairs – with the butcher, the baker, and candle-stick maker, and so on. But we do need to release ourselves from their “inexorable” influences in our intellectual and academic inquiries. Thus, we must examine our notions of space, time, matter (elementary entities), and motion, both to make the ‘pictures’ dwelling in them explicit and to justify offering an alternative.

In the classical view, instantaneous, timeless spaces hold a privileged position. Space is thought of as an immutable, unchanging, homogeneous, causally inert, empty ‘container’, a ‘place’ in which different ‘things’ can be, and be in different ‘positions’. Reality, in this spatial view, can be described at any instant, in terms of a spatial configuration of basic ‘elements’. And, at any instant, it is complete, in the sense that all its parts are given at once – hence the privileging of ‘pictures’ as configurations of elements all present together. Indeed, we could say that the world is portrayed in this view as a picture. This is in contrast to a temporal reality (e.g. music), which is always incomplete, for its ‘parts’ (if they can be called that) are of necessity successive, i.e., nonsimultaneous. Classically, time is secondary to space, and often thought of as a fourth, ‘spatial’ dimension. As such, it too is an empty, neutral, unchanging ‘container’, one in which events can happen. Thus time is prior to change, for changes occur in time. While instants of time are differentiated by their succession, by something coming after something else, in this picture, succession is reduced to juxtaposition, i.e., it is changed from a temporal to a spatial difference, a difference in position, with “past” events lying to the left of a point representing the present and “future” events to the right (Capek, 1961, p.162).

In contrast to the unchanging nature of space and time, the only changeable entity is matter, where matter is thought of as an impenetrable stuff that fills certain regions of space. Unlike space and time, matter is not mathematically (i.e., infinitesimally) continuous. Talk of it as constituted of discrete entities or elements is justified by talk of empty space being between them. Indeed, and this is crucial, entities in space with their own self-contained or local properties, are thought of in existence as such prior to their subsequent interactions with other such entities. Motion is thought of as a change in the spatial coordinates of a material body in time - hence the necessity for empty space between material bodies: without it, they would not have the room to move. But, while motion implies matter, matter does not imply motion. Matter may remain at rest until it is caused to move by being impacted by other matter in motion. Nothing but motion can be the cause of motion. Thus in the classical view, the basic entities in and of the world are fixed, the quantity of motion stays constant (conservation of energy), only the spatial distribution of basic entities varies with time. In contrast to this view, of ourselves as self-contained subjects looking out on our of surroundings as already organized into a world with a timeless space, and a spaceless (extensionless) time to it, we shall with Voloshinov return to a more primordial, richer notion of existence, open to other kinds of formulation.

The view “from within:” keeping the conversation going

We cannot explore in detail here the enormous web of implications to which this classical picture of physical reality gives rise. But two aspects of it are of especial relevance for us here, in our talk as intellectuals, as
theoreticians in the academy concerned with theory critique. One connects with the assumption already mentioned above, that we feel that there is a common arena, i.e., in classical space, within which all our theoretical conjectures, as ‘views’, can be appropriately compared and critically appraised. This leads us to talk as if the objects of our concern – “culture,” “society,” “persons,” “actions,” “society,” “social structures,” “language,” “communication,” etc. – are all already ‘out there’ in this classical space. For, as we each vie with each other as to which of our ‘views’ is, if not more accurate, then better in some other way, we fail to check as to whether we are all referring to the same thing in the first place. We simply assume that we are. Indeed, not only do we assume that they are already out there as complete things, but they are out there as separate, self-contained, “elements of reality,” so to speak, themselves made up of similar such self-contained elements, all awaiting connection to the other things around them in terms to be discovered by us. This points to another aspect of importance.

To the extent that the aim of our current aim of inquiry is merely a representation, a structure which stands in an external relation to the state of affairs it depicts, its results do not immediately act back to exert a responsive influence on our practices. They are something about which we must think and deliberate. As individuals, we can either accept representations as true or relevant, or reject them as false or irrelevant. If a particular representation is to be applied to our practices, then its particular meaning for them still requires interpretation – and then we are once again back into the realm of argument and debate as to whether we have interpreted it aright. As purely logical or formal structures, the problem with representational claims to knowledge is their lack of any living relation to their circumstances. They do not make an appearance within our practices while we are acting as practitioners. They appear to us as ‘pictureable’ structures, external to them, only when we have stepped out of the flow of our practical activities to become thinkers. As just pictures, they do not of themselves make any spontaneously ‘calls’ on us to respond to them in our ongoing practices.

If this is so, not only are the results of our intellectual endeavors problematic in our practical-social activities, but the very value of intellectual inquiry as such in human affairs seems to be in question. Why should such (possibly fitting) representations be taken seriously at all? Doesn’t so-and-so’s ‘view’ just become a ‘flavor of the month’ issue, to be replaced by another next month, according to how historical circumstances change? In other words, the problem of a representation’s relation to its supposed object, raises the yet further problems to do both with regressions of interpretation and with finding a rooting for our intellectual inquiries. Without some felt connection between our utterances and what they are supposed to be ‘about’, how do we know of their relevance to an issue in question, or whether we all are talking and arguing with each other ‘about the same thing’.

Hence our unending traffic in academe in arguing about different ‘views’ or ‘positions’ as to what is ‘out there’, and about what kind of analysis into what elements and their connections is appropriate. For the classical view licences our claim, played out in our seminar rooms and conference halls, that rather than working directly to establish new practices, that new actions must be grounded in a new kind of seeing, that views are prior to acting. It is the task of practitioners to ‘apply’ our theories. But more than just impelling us toward this stance, the classical view stands in the way and obstructs alternatives. The view, as to the centrality of views, leads us to treat what we do willfully and intellectually as self-conscious, Cartesian thinkers reflecting on the world while withdrawn from acting in it – as providing us with the proper foundations or rootings for our inquiries. Those aspects of our lives together in which we respond in completely spontaneous, unthinking ways to each other’s activities, passes us by, invisible to our eyes and inaudible to our ears.

In this respect, while Descartes (1968) appealed to a self-given certainty and resolved “to study no other science than that which I could find within myself or else in the great book of the world” (p.33), Wittgenstein (1969) adopted a very different starting point: “I want to regard man here as an animal,” he said, “As a creature in a primitive state... Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocinatination” (no. 475). In other words, as Wittgenstein sees it, the classical view is a view of our surroundings that emerges later in our lives, as an outcome of other, much earlier, involvements with the others around us. “One forgets” he says, “that a great deal of stage-setting in language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense” (1953, no.257). Thus, in contrast to Descartes, Wittgenstein wants to consider people’s activities in a precursor world, prior to their individual willful and intellectual acts, a proto-world which remains always there in the background and which makes such a way of being and acting possible. This also is crucial to Voloshinov’s approach: it is not the self-identical nature of linguistic forms or patterns that is important in understanding its meaning, but the ‘directing-sense’ it exerts on us in the unfolding movement of its voicing, how it ‘moves’ us to
respond to it.

In moving to a new starting point, and in reorienting himself toward influences which determine the structure of our expressions, internally, from within the event and moment of their expression, both Voloshinov and Wittgenstein introduce us bit-by-bit to an aspect of the world between us that we have not previously noticed it in this way before. Although it is our world, and we are in one sense quite familiar with the demands that our felt sense of what is fitting and what is not makes on us, we only find it making its appearance in this or that specific way according to the specific activities within which we are involved. We cannot stand back, as we can from the world of objects, to survey it, to get a picture of it as a whole. How might we talk about this realm, about our active relations to and involvements with our surroundings, before our surroundings have, so to speak, crystallized out into a “world” for us? How shall we allude to the nature of our inner mental activities prior to how they appear to us as self-conscious, self-contained, reflective intellectuals? What are our proto-mental activities like in our unthinking, spontaneously responsive, but still intelligent, activities?

At this point, it is impossible to do more than mention some relevant preliminaries to answering such questions as these: As noted above, we use words, originally learnt in describing matters open to observation by all, to talk ‘about’ the nature of inner, mental events. But as Wittgenstein (1953) makes clear, the expressions or utterances by which individuals express their thoughts or feelings to us are quite different from statements based on observations: rather than then them putting their ideas into words or using words to stand for things, they speak in spontaneous response to a circumstance. As such, they are, so to speak, interwoven into it, they only have their being as a participant part of it. Thus, if I say “I am in pain,” rather than speaking accurately according to “rules,” I am elaborating on or building on a natural reaction. Although I may be repeating a well-worn verbal expression, how precisely and uniquely I ‘repeat’ it (to put it oxymoronically) – the particular pausing, timing, and intonation, and its inter-relating into other aspects of my activities – is expressive of my unique, contextualized meaning. Thus, although repeated, the familiar expression is not repeated (to use some phraseology of Voloshinov’s) as a “self-identical form” but as “a changeable and adaptable sign.” Such expressions function, not to convey a meaning in a flash, but to provide the partial specification of a circumstance from which a precisely meaningful exchange can begin and be developed. They are not to with seeing in common, but with feeling in common. And their development is to do with giving a shared significance to shared feelings in an already shared circumstance.

Paradoxically, although the initially shared feelings are only partially articulated publicly, they nonetheless have such a unique and precise ‘shape’ and ‘direction’ to them, that they function as ‘standards’ against which public formulations may be judged as to their adequacy. Thus, about the seeming ‘repetition’ of such expressions, Wittgenstein (1953) reminds, “but this is not the end of the language-game,” says Wittgenstein (1953), “it is the beginning (no.290).” And with regard to other similar such beginnings, he also remarks: “What is the primitive reaction with which the language-game begins...? The primitive reaction may have been a glance or a gesture, but it may also have been a word” (p.218). While something may seem to be repeated in all such expressions, to the extent that the expression occurs in away responsive to it circumstances, something new and unique indicative of their nature is created within it.

How does all this relate to our concern with theory critique, and to what such discursive exchanges of this kind might miss? As a part of his general critique of “the unconscious assumptions built into [our philosophical] vocabulary” (p.xiii) and how they influence our thinking, Rorty (1979) suggests that Wittgenstein and Heidegger have, to an extent, understood how to move on from the classical picture. In doing what Rorty calls edifying rather than systematizing philosophy, “they do not think that when we say something we must necessarily be expressing a view about something. We might just be saying something – participating in a conversation rather than contributing to an inquiry... Both men suggest we see people as saying this, better or worse things, without seeing them as externalizing inner representations of reality. But this is only their entering wedge, for then we must cease ourselves as seeing this, without beginning to see ourselves as seeing something else. We must get the visual, and in particular the mirroring, metaphors out of our speech altogether.” To do that we have to understand our speech not only as not the externalizing of inner representations, but as not a representation at all” (p.371).

His purpose in urging this, is to move us on in the academy from our fixation upon argumentation and debate, and to orient us more toward conversation. For, as we noted in discussing Voloshinov’s dialogical mode of inquiry above, by arranging for the two major ‘voices’ involved in controversy over the nature of language to
be responsive to each other, Voloshinov allows his readers to do more than merely witness an argumentative exchange of views, he presents them as conversational partners. Indeed, he goes further, and invites his readers into the conversation too, thus allowing them, in the course of responding to his text in their reading of it, to create the sense of a complexly intertwined, dynamic reality, within which all involved can and do partake. What theory critique misses, then, in its continual debate as to which explicitly formulated view is worth espousing in our dealings with reality, is the importance of conversation, and what it is that conversation can do which cannot be done in any other way: namely, the creation of new forms of talk, new descriptions, new ways of relating ourselves to our surroundings, which we can then, later, elaborate into new practices.

Thus, rather than seeking to discover a finalized truth, Rorty (1979) suggests that philosophy should aim “at continuing a conversation” (p.373); and “to see” edifying philosophers as conversational partners is an alternative to seeing them as holding views on subjects of common concern” (p.372). In other words: “To see (sic) keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than as beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately” (p.378). Or, to put it yet another way: Rather than as in the classical picture, in which our talk refers to separate, self-contained, middle-sized objects (made up of configurations of particles) in dynamical relations, whose repetitive and order patterns of movement we must discover. We must think of ourselves as living in a new world, a world within which time rather than space takes precedence, a world of momentary events rather than of enduring things, events of inter-relation. Where, in such a world as this, each momentary event, to an extent, is a first time occurrence, a world of beginnings and beginnings and beginnings, a world in which the continual creation of novelty is routine.

A shared, pre- or proto-theoretical sense of what our surroundings require of us: a pre-cursor world of beginnings

As mentioned above, to the extent that representations stand in an external relation to the states of affairs they depict, they do not call out any immediate, spontaneous responses from us, related to the state of affairs within which they occur. Yet without some sensed connection between our expressions and what they are supposed to be ‘about’, how do we know of their relevance to an issue in question? How do we know that when we are expressing a ‘view’ as to the nature of an essentially theoretical entity, that we are talking and arguing with each other ‘about the same thing’? Voloshinov’s (1986) approach, in terms of people’s responsive reactions to each other’s expressions, gives us a way of dealing with these problems. Like Wittgenstein above, rather than talking of our expressions or utterances as being ‘about’ a circumstance, they work to provide a partial specification of it, a point of departure, from which a more specific meaningful exchange can develop. Thus, instead of our utterances being in an external relation of depiction to aspects of a situation, working to represent from outside it something within it, they are like gestures that work within it, to draw our attention to aspects or features to which we might respond further. They thus participate in the very situation of which they are themselves a part, and in this sense are in an internal relation to it.

Voloshinov (1986) describes the relation of our utterances to their surroundings thus: “The immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine – and determine from within, so to speak – the structure of an utterance” (p.86), and, we should add, our utterances act back to further determine the social situation and the broader social milieu, also from within. In other words, two two-way flows of activity are at work in structuring our utterances: (1) our utterances are both rooted in and responsive to the situations in which they are uttered, (2) while at the same time, they also work responsively to give further form or specification to these situations. Hence we are already participants within the very activities, toward new aspects of which, our utterances can gesture. Or, to put it another way: We can ‘point out’ previously unnoticed possibilities (for connection and relation) in such situations, in the course of our talk in response to the occurrence of aspects and events within them. Thus, to bring such possibilities to our attention, Voloshinov does not need to seek yet another form of theoretical representation, another set of explicit rules of organization (but now a set of a much more multiform and complex kind) to impose, externally, on our circumstances. He can inform us of their nature in quite a different way: By an appropriate use of words, he can point or gesture toward the pre-theoretical or proto-theoretical kind of understandings that we all, within the cultural group of those studying language, already share between us. He can draw our attention, at certain crucial moments, toward important features of our conversationally structured, living involvements with each other. Indeed, he can bring to our awareness the kind of practical understandings that can only be experienced from within dialogical-structured relations with
the others and the othernesses around us, understandings that cannot be experienced by uninvolved, external observers.

But there is something else of very great importance that is hinted at in Voloshinov’s formulation above, that an utterance’s structure is determined by influences in its background surroundings. I will elaborate it in more detail later below, but it must be mentioned in outline form here. It is that, as soon as we begin to take notice of the usually ignored, background realm of people’s spontaneously responsive reactions to each other and to their surroundings, we realize that at any one moment in time, there are not just two participants at work in shaping the structure of an utterance in an interaction, the speaker(s) and the listener(s), but three: the shared situation they create between them becomes crucial. As Voloshinov (1986) puts it: “The organizing center of any utterance, of any experience, is not within but outside – in the social milieu surrounding the individual being” (p.93). In this sphere, because every individual acts in response to the activities of the others and othernesses around them, none can be held individually responsible for what they do. Yet, we cannot treat their joint actions as arising from external causes either, for what occurs, occurs only ‘in’ their joint activity, and they, collectively, are responsible for how that activity unfolds.

Thus participants in an interaction find themselves acting in what seems to them, because its character cannot be attributed to any of them individually, to be an externally existing, ‘objective’ situation. However, because it arises in the context of the spontaneous flow of relationally-responsive activity occurring between them, it cannot be simply ‘objective’. Thus “the organizing center of any utterance” is like a third living, but invisible super-participant in the interaction. And, in being responsive to it, participants must answer to its ‘calls’, they must act to meet ‘its’ requirements. Thus members of a community do not solely answer to the calls of the other members of the community, they answer to them but as ‘the culture’ (as we call it) of the community requires. In other words, an ‘it’ – which we might talk of as the spirit or style of the culture – seems to be present as an organizing agency in all our dialogically structured interactions. Just as a dance can seem to come to dance the dancers, or a game to play the players, so the participants in any responsively shared situation come to feel that their individual actions only make sense as participant parts of a larger whole. It is the responsive relationship that determines its own ‘participant parts’ from within, so to speak.

In other words, the sphere of individual and deliberate action has its meaning and makes sense only within the context of and against a wholistic sense of the changing background of requirements arising in the shared circumstances people spontaneously create between them in their ongoing, responsive reactions to their surroundings. Thus for Voloshinov, the sense of an “a priori ordered necessity” that Descartes discovered within himself (but attributed to God as its source), or which workers such as Chomsky or Schegloff think of as the “organizing device” of a grammar or syntax (and locate in the classical space of academe), Voloshinov discovers as existing in a pre- or proto-theoretical sense in the intrinsic nature of people’s spontaneously responsive ways of relating themselves to their surroundings. And they subsist, furthermore, in quite different forms in different ways of relating.

This kind of shared, pre- or proto-theoretical sense of a something required by our circumstances, of a surrounding reality independent of any of the individual participants within it, yet not independent of them as a social group, differs utterly from a rational system that can comprehended and contained by a single consciousness. Bakhtin (1984) describes its nature as follows:

“It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that in principle cannot be fitted within the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak. by its very nature full of event potential [sobytiina] and is born at that point of contact among various consciousnesses. The monologic way of perceiving cognition and truth is only one of the possible ways. It arises only where consciousness is placed above existence” (p.81).

It is this aim – to arrive at a shared, unified, but still open sense of what our utterances are like, not from the viewpoint of the uninvolved, passive outsider, but from within, from the viewpoint of persons actively involved in speaking and listening while also involved in relations with the others and othernesses around them – that Voloshinov achieves, I think, in the special methods he employs in his inquiries.

Such a shared, unified, but still open sense is, as I mentioned above, called a “structure of feeling” by
Williams (1977). There is a need for such a concept, because, as Williams sees it: “The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity it [the] immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products... relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes” (p.128). “Again and again,” he remarks, “what we have to observe is in effect a pre-emergence, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named” (p.126). The task is to do justice to the richly intertwined and often contradictory complexity of the linguistic aspects of our cultural activities. Before turning to an more detailed examination of how Voloshinov achieves this justice, however, it will be useful to examine the assumptions embedded in our current practices of intellectual inquiry in more detail, and how they influence the ways in which we form what, in the classical tradition, we speak of as the “objects” of our inquiries. They have become so deeply embedded in our cultural practices that their speculative nature has become “dialogically repressed” (Billig, 1999). We can do this through an examination of Saussure’s approach to the study of linguistic structure.

**Saussure’s method of inquiry and Voloshinov’s: an initial contrast**

The classical tradition has been deeply influenced by Descartes, and his concern with the mastery of nature. Thus it comes as no surprise that, to the extent that the human sciences model themselves on the natural sciences, that they also seek to formulate the topics of their study as objects and their properties, so that we may “put them to all the uses to which they are appropriate.” In the study of language, we can, as Voloshinov did, take Saussure as a paradigm here. However, we should add, that if our aim is to understand the character of the responsive relations between ourselves and the others around us in a way, not to do with mastering and controlling them, but to do with entering into more richly structured dialogues with them, then, to formulate them as “objects,” unable either to ‘call’ on us or to ‘answer’ us back when we act upon them, is clearly utterly inappropriate. Here, however, I shall not argue this point19. Here, it will be more useful to see how all the features of the classical approach are played out by de Saussure (1911/1959) in his construction of langue as an abstract object of study, in his inauguration of structural linguistics as an intellectual enterprise.

In setting the scene for his eventual focusing on language as a system of “differences without positive terms” (p.120), Saussure (1911/1959) notes that: “Other sciences work with objects that are given in advance and can be considered from different viewpoints; but not linguistics... Far from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object...” (p.8). Indeed, linguistic phenomena are so various, so complicated and many-sided, he says, that “the object of linguistics appears to us as a confused mass of heterogeneous and unrelated things... speech is many-sided and heterogeneous; straddling several areas simultaneously – physical, physiological, and psychological – it belongs to both the individual and to society; we cannot put it into any category of human facts, for we cannot discover its unity” (p.9). Consequently, “as I see it,” Saussure continues, “there is only one solution to the foregoing difficulties: from the very outset we must put both feet on the ground of language [langue] and use language as the norm of all other manifestations of speech” (p.9). Where by the term “language” here, he means language considered “as a self-contained whole and principle of classification” (p.9).

We should note here, Saussure’s unquestioned assumption of one aspect of the Cartesian stance: that a self-given certainty is a sufficient criterion for his claims. And it is in search of that kind of self-given certainty that he turns away from speech, away from our living, responsive activities, and toward those aspects of language which can be seen in terms of fixed and stable (i.e., dead) forms. Thus, in separating language from speech, rather than respecting their internal relations to each other, he divorces them completely. They end up in an external relation to each other, as if they each could have an existence as utterly separate elements of reality. “In separating language from speaking, “ he says, “we are at the same time separating: (1) what is social from what is individual; and (2) what is essential from what is accidental. Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product passively assimilated by the individual. It never requires premeditation, and reflection enters in only for the purposes of classification... Speaking, on the contrary, is an individual act. It is willful and intellectual” (p.14).

Having separated language from speech in this way, he can now begin to summarize its main characteristics: It is “a well-defined object in the heterogeneous mass of speech facts,... something that we can study separately [as a structured object]... Whereas speech is heterogeneous, language, as defined, is
homogeneous. It is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images... Linguistic signs... are realities that have their seat in the brain...” (pp.14-15).

Saussure (1911/1959) then, after having, technically, defined language as a system of elements known only negatively, in terms of differences in relation to each other, goes on to remark, that: “Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas or sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonetic differences that have issued from the system” (p.120). In other words, an abstract entity, langue, the language system – that has been defined into existence – now comes to take on a reality of its own of a quite fundamental nature. It becomes a kind of God-idea, a single source of reasoned necessities, the “one comprehensive essence” (Wittgenstein, 1981, no.444) in terms of which we hope to explain the order we infer as being present in our knowledge of language.

Such a constructed “system” can, thus, easily come to displace, quite inappropriately, the pluralistic set of everyday influences from which it has been derived. While such systematic constructions may play a crucially important role in the natural sciences, if they are allowed completely to usurp the influence of much richer, more open and multidimensional factors, they may exert a very dangerous influence indeed. Rather than opening up a royal road to unconfused scientific research, they might very well block off access to just those initial explorations required at the inception of a new intellectual enterprise, if it is to do full justice to its phenomena of inquiry. Indeed, if we return to Saussure’s remarks above, in which he justifies his focus on just certain aspects of language and not on others, we can see him relinquish a rich, multi-dimensional, pre- or proto-theoretical grasp of language in favor of a much more limited, exclusionary version whose critical aspect is that it can be systematized as an “integral object” (p.9).

Reading Saussure’s claims above, as individual thinkers, we find no trouble in immediately acknowledging their truth (at least those of us who are concerned with these issues and have ourselves struggled with the problem of how to conduct a disciplined inquiry into verbal phenomena). For, as masterful users of language already, and as a result of our discussions and reflections on it with others, we already possess both a practical understanding and to an extent a conceptual grasp of language. Without an initial, and to an extent organized, synoptic grasp of what language as such is, i.e., an inter-related, unified grasp of it, we would not be able to follow Saussure’s arguments for his (re)-constitution of it as a normative system of self-identical forms, and of it thus as an object of study for scientific linguistics. Saussure would not be able to make his claims about the many-sided complexity of language, if we did not all in some sense already take the word ‘language’ to refer to a seeming unity of some kind.

This too is Voloshinov’s point of departure; but quite unlike Saussure, he is not concerned with language as represented within an individual consciousness at all, but with language as only having its existence within the ceaseless flow of spontaneously responsive activity between people:

“Understanding,” he says, “is a response to a sign with signs. And this chain of ideological creativity and understanding, moving from sign to sign and then to a new sign, is perfectly consistent and continuous... [N]owhere is there a break in the chain, nowhere does the chain plunge into inner being, nonmaterial in nature and unembodied in signs” (p.11).

This idea of responsive understanding – which by its very nature connects or relates us to our surroundings – is, as we shall see, is the key to Voloshinov’s whole approach; but I will reserve a full exploration of it till later.

Here, it will be useful to contrast the central role played by Descartes’s (and Saussure’s) assumption that it our self-consciousness sense of our own inner mental activities that is at the heart of our practices of intellectual inquiry, with Voloshinov’s alternative assumption. Consciousness, as he sees it, is a late arrival on the scene of interaction. Understanding as a response to a sign with signs, embodied practical understanding, may take place spontaneously without any inner awareness of meaning occurring. It is precisely this, of course, that is missed in traditional theory oriented approaches; they require the prior existence of consciousness as the source of meanings. But “consciousness becomes consciousness,” Voloshinov (1986) claims, “only in the process of social interaction” (p.11). Only in the stream of verbal communication do people come to be conscious, come to be self-aware and to be able to deliberate on the meaning of their actions prior to their performance of them. Thus, initially at least, rather than individuals consciously or tacitly drawing upon any inner picture (of language as a structured object) to give shape to their utterances, he suggests (as we have
already seen) that “the immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine – and determine from within, so to speak – the structure of an utterance” (p.86). In other words, rather than acting out of any already existing inner plans or structures, we responsively act into a surrounding situation, partially at least, in an immediate, spontaneous, unself-conscious and unself-controlled way. We answer without any prior thought in a bodily responsive way to ‘its’ calls, we act according to ‘its’ requirements. And furthermore, should others around us question us, as we become sensitive to the nuances around us to which we are sensitive, we can give others reasons for so responding. We can refer them, not to matters of linguistic structure, but to how our expressions were interwoven into our other actions which were interwoven, in their turn, into their particular surrounding circumstances.

Indeed, as Wittgenstein (1981) remarks about the “primitive” nature of such responsive forms of action, that “this sort of behavior is pre-linguistic [in the sense] that a language-game is based on it, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not itself the result of thought” (no.541). We cannot just impose a pre-existing way of acting on a circumstance; we must interweave our acting in a differentiated way into its details.

It is our nature as living, embodied beings that has been ignored in previous, traditional or classical approaches. But it is just this – our unremitting involvement in a ceaselessly unfolding flow of relationally-responsive activity of one kind or another, spontaneously originating in the active relations occurring between ourselves and the others and othernesses in our surroundings – rather than anything in our individual consciousnesses, that Voloshinov takes as his starting point. As he notes in this respect: “Representatives of abstract objectivism constantly stress – and it is one of their basic principles – that the system of language is an objective fact external to and independent of any consciousness. Actually, represented as a system of self-identical, immutable norms, it can be perceived in this way only by the individual consciousness and from the point of view of that consciousness... From a truly objective viewpoint, one that attempts to see language in a way completely apart from how it appears to any given individual at any given moment in time, language presents the picture of a ceaseless flow of becoming. From the standpoint of observing a language objectively, from above, there is no real moment in time when a synchronic system of language could be constructed” (Voloshinov, 1986, pp.65-66).

If we then go on to ask whether language really exists for the speaker’s subjective consciousness in action as an objective system of incontestable, normatively identical forms, then we have to answer in the negative: “The speaker’s subjective consciousness does not in the least operate with language as a system of normatively identical forms,” he says. “That system is merely an abstraction arrived with a good deal of trouble and with a definite cognitive and practical focus of attention. The system of language is the product of deliberation on language, and deliberation of a kind by no means carried out by the consciousness of the native speaker himself and by no means carried out for the immediate purposes of speaking” (Voloshinov, 1986, p.66). The system of language is an object in the consciousness of an individual theorist, externally imposed on the responsive stream of interaction spontaneously occurring between people. But how does language appear from the point of view of the speaker’s subjective consciousness while engaged in communication? Does its existence as a set of normatively identical forms matter at all for the individual speaker? These and other such questions are what we shall examine below.

**Voloshinov’s dialogical approach**

*I: Initial considerations*

“What the speaker values,” says Voloshinov (1986), “is not that aspect of the form which is invariably identical in all instances of its usage, despite the nature of those instances, but that aspect of the linguistic form because of which it can figure in the given, concrete context, because of which it becomes a sign adequate to the conditions of the given, concrete situation. We can express it this way: *what is important for the speaker about a linguistic form is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign. That is the speaker’s point of view*” (p.68). Listeners, also, do not look for identical forms in a speaker’s talk. In the real-life practice of social exchange, a second person simply shows their understanding of the expressions of a first in how they spontaneously respond to them. The task of understanding a verbal utterance “does not basically amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context,... i.e., it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to
recognizing its identity” (p.68). This is what is meant by the claim that “any true understanding is dialogic in nature” (p.102); it is only realized in people’s living, practical, bodily responses to each other. They do not have to ‘work out’, intellectually, how to respond. It is something that they are trained into as they develop more refined and more well articulated ways of reacting to those around them. “Individuals do not receive a ready-made language at all,” claims Voloshinov (1986), “rather, they enter upon the stream of verbal communication; indeed, only in this stream does their consciousness first begin to operate” (p.81). Initially, that is all that matters: being able to enter into the spontaneously responsive stream of activity already occurring amongst those around us. Whatever might occur in our heads, as an aspect of our own developing “inner speech,” can come later. Once we become language users in our relations to others, we can gradually come to respond to ourselves, to our own commands, directions, instructions, etc., as we already do to them.

What is central, then, for Voloshinov in all of this, is the intrinsically social nature of the utterance; the fact of our spontaneously responsive relations to the others and othernesses around us. Thus for him, an utterance is only an utterance if it spontaneously creates a living contact between a speaker and the others in their surroundings. By contrast, as we have seen, Saussure takes an utterance to be an individual act of a willful and intellectual kind, and thus capricious and accidental. This, as Voloshinov notes, is the precise point at which Saussure takes a wrong turn. It is his failure to take the ineradicable social nature of people’s spontaneously responsive connections with each other into account, that leads him to ignore the whole social background to language – and the possibility of language being developed as merely a refinement or elaboration of an already organized set of possible real-life understandings. Without any grasp of, or concern with, our embedding in a ceaseless flow of spontaneously responsive communication, Saussure can only conceive of speaking as an individual activity, cognitively driven.

Let us for a moment explore how it is that Voloshinov, starting with seemingly many very similar considerations to Saussure’s, but with a very different initial stance and initial set of questions in mind, arrives at a very different set of formulations. Whereas Saussure (1911/1959), as we saw above, with the Cartesian aim of arriving at a self-given certainty in minds, begins with the question as to “what is both the integral and concrete object of linguistics” (p.7), Voloshinov (1986) suggests that “when beginning an investigation… it is essential to get the feel of the actual subject matter – the object under investigation; it is essential to separate it from the reality surrounding it and to make a preliminary delimitation of it” (p.45, my emphasis).

What Voloshinov wants to characterize here, is not what uninvolved, outside observers can see, but the acts of active, involved speaker-listeners and their reasons for so acting, the felt necessities in terms of which they shape their conduct at crucial moments. Indeed, in line with his aim to arrive at an understanding of how the immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine the structure of an utterance from within, so to speak, he seeks that kind of understanding of what it is like to be ‘inside’ just that moment when one person from an organized social group, makes a responsive contact with another²⁴. It is a matter of getting a sense of what is present to us in, we might say, “the interactive or dialogical moment.” But the task of “attempting to get the feel of the actual presence of the subject matter” (p.45, my emphasis²⁵) in his investigation, is not, however, easy. As he points out, we might initially identify it as primarily an acoustic phenomenon, but if we “isolate sound as a purely acoustic phenomenon, we will not have language as our specific object” (p.46). If add to it the physiological processes of sound production and reception, and attempt to take account of the mental by adding in psychology, “language as the specific object of study still eludes us” (p.46). What this complex aggregate – of the physical, physiological, and the psychological – lacks, says Voloshinov, “is a ‘soul’; its component parts are a collection of separate entities not joined together to form a unity by some inner, pervasive governance that would transform that complex into precisely the phenomenon of language” (p.46). Its parts are not internally related to each other as participants parts within a single, concrete, living unity, they do not each have their character only in their relations to the others within an indivisible whole. By abstracting each aspect from its living context and re-positioning it as a self-contained, objective element of reality, within a logical, single order of connectedness, its original internal relations to its neighbors are lost and ignored.

Can such an amalgam, a collection of disjoined parts, ever be sensibly re-constituted as a unity? No, it cannot. But what we can do in our inquiries, suggests Voloshinov (1986), is to choose a somewhat different point for departure for our inquiries than Saussure’s Cartesian starting point in the realm of self-given certainties. That starting point, we could say, has us as coming on the scene too late in the day, it then leads us to look in the wrong direction for the wrong thing. Voloshinov has us come on the scene much earlier. Instead
of taking people’s willful and intellectual acts as basic, and looking back to discover a supposed already existing but hidden source of organization with ourselves, he starts by considering people’s activities prior to their individual willful and intellectual acts. And furthermore, rather than inward and backward, he looks outward and forward, toward how people responsively create ways to ‘go on’ in their spontaneous and non-deliberate acts. In moving to a new starting point, and in reorienting himself toward influences which determine the structure of an utterance from within the event of its being uttered, Voloshinov makes two moves: (1) The first is to place our utterances back in “the unified sphere of organized social intercourse” (p.46) – for “after all, the speaker and listener must belong to the same language community – to a society organized along certain lines” (p.46). (2) The second is even more crucial: “our two persons must be encompassed by unity of the immediate social situation, i.e., they must make contact, as one person to another, on a specific basis” (p.46). This is what is needed, suggests Voloshinov (1986), “to bring this whole multifarious system of features and relations, of processes and artifacts, to one common denominator: all its various lines must be channeled to one [organizing] center...” (p.47). We have already called this center, this unity of the immediate social situation, “the interactive or dialogical moment.” Rather than in the deep interior of individual speakers or in the system of language, it can only be found out in the world in people’s living contacts with each other as they unfold in different specific circumstances.

Once we view our utterances in this context, although speech is “many-sided and heterogeneous” in our reflections upon it (Saussure), it does not, we realize, appear to us here as an ill-made patchwork of crudely joined parts. The three separate and unreconcilable aspects of speech that occupy our (theoretical) attention as uninvolved observers of it, do not occupy our attention as involved speaker/listeners. In practice, we do not first see or feel utterances and then ‘work out’ their meaning; we understand them immediately by spontaneously responding to them. Only later, after having used our understanding of our expression’s meaning in identifying it as an utterance, do we move into analyzing our utterances to abstract regularities from them in an effort to formulate an abstract system within which to place them.

Thus, with the two basic features mentioned above in mind, “we may say,” concludes Voloshinov (1986), “that the unity of the social milieu and the unity of the immediate social event of communication are conditions absolutely essential for bringing our physico-psycho-physiological complex into relation with language, with speech, so that it can become a language-speech fact” (p.47). Thus, rather than insisting, like Saussure, that we must begin with a disinterested, uninvolved, objective stance, determined to find a single organizing center, for the observable order in our utterances, hidden either in the individual speaker or in his or her surrounding environment, Voloshinov begins with a different stance. He begins with the stance of an actively involved practitioner, the ordinary, everyday user of language, with what we have called above a relationally-responsive stance. In our daily lives, as we know and spontaneously expect, our utterances join us in a situation as co-participants who know, understand, and evaluate the situation in a like manner. If they did not, we would be consistently, rather than only occasionally, misunderstanding each other. The specificity of an utterance “consists precisely in its being located between organized individuals, in its being the medium of their communication” (p.12), we relate ourselves to them in one precise way, or another, or another.

But currently, we do not reflectively grasp quite how we achieve such a specific relating, a joining, how we use our signs in different ways at each unfolding moment to create, sustain, and to further articulate our relationships to what is around us. It is the life of things, so to speak, that Voloshinov wants to investigate. Like Wittgenstein (1981), who suggests that “[w]e do not understand [our] own transactions, that is to say [we] do not have a synoptic view of them,” (no.273), an overall sense of the ‘landscape’ of next possible moves we might make at any one moment given how we are currently placed upon it, Voloshinov too seeks a similar (practical) understanding - the kind of understanding which consists in, as Wittgenstein (1953) puts it, “in ‘seeing connections’” (no.122). He wants to understand how our utterances are shaped, what the influences that are at work on them are; and where the organizing center, the sphere in which their shaping takes place, is located?

His aim, then, is to arrive at a synoptic scenic-sense, from the inside, of what it is to be a co-participant, along with a crowd of others, within a whole network of activities all inter-related with each other dialogically, i.e., an active, continuously changing, always developing, network of activities that are quite often just as much in conflict with each other as in accord. No wonder the task of doing justice to such a complex reality is so difficult23. But it is at precisely this point that Voloshinov’s whole approach departs from previous workers in this sphere, departs from theory critique. After his initial account of the problem of characterizing what the
concrete, material existence of language is like for us, he turns to consider how the possible *positive* achievements of previous approaches that might be of help to us: “What are the signposts,” he asks, “already placed along the road to its solution by which we may take our bearings?” (p.47). Like Wittgenstein, and many others in this sphere, he takes the image of the landscape here as focal. There are two basic trends to consider, he suggests: *individualistic subjectivism* and *abstract objectivism*.

### II: Individualistic Subjectivism

*Individualistic subjectivism*, Voloshinov points out, is associated with *romanticism*, with the creative talents of individuals. Whereas, in the epochs of the Renaissance and neoclassicism, language study had focused on written forms of dead and alien languages, the romantics were the first philologists of the vernacular and modern languages. They did not approach the utterance from the point of view of a passively understanding philologist but studied their own language as practitioners of it, from within. For them, language activity is an unceasing process of creativity, the continuous creation of new meaning. It consists of unique, first-time events. “Linguistic thought,” Voloshinov (1986) quotes Vossler as saying, “is essentially poetic thought; linguistic truth is artistic truth, is meaningful beauty” (p.51). In other words, for individualistic subjectivism, the basic reality of language is not language as a ready-made system of immediately usable patterns or forms - phonetic, syntactical, and otherwise - but basic for them is “the individual creative act of speech” (p.48). “What follows from this is that, from the standpoint of language generation, the vital feature of every speech act does not consist in the grammatical forms, which are shared, stable, and immediately usable in all other utterances of a given language” (p.51), but – if such abstract forms have any reality at all – in them being modified in unique ways to both individualize and uniquely characterize a given utterance. And it is these creative, *stylistic* modifications, which later, may “solidify into grammatical forms” (p.51). In making these claims, however, followers of individualistic subjectivism took the viewpoint of the person speaking and expressing him- or herself; they did not seem each utterance as responsively related to its surroundings. They took “the monologic utterance as the ultimate reality and point of departure for its thinking about language” (p.84).

Thus for them, an utterance was “the expression of an individual consciousness, its ambitions, intentions, creative impulses, tastes, and so on” (p.84). Thus in their view, the central source of influence shaping our utterances is located in the deep interior of the individual psyche. Such a view presupposes, however, as Voloshinov (1986) points out, “that the expressible is something that can somehow take shape and exist apart from expression; that it exists first in one form and then switches to another form” (p.84). Thus individualistic subjectivism assumes the existence of an inner, nonlinguistic but nonetheless orderly basis for a person’s outward expressions, qualitatively different from their embodiment in signs. As Wittgenstein (1953) similarly notes, in connection with St. Augustine’s notions about a child learning language, “it is as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already think, only not yet speak. And ‘think’ here would mean something like ‘talk to itself’” (no.32). But how can we know when we switch from the inner form of a thought to the form of its outward expression, that the latter is an accurate rendition or representation of the former -- especially as we can never know the true character of the inner form except through the vehicle of its outward expression? As both Wittgenstein and Voloshinov show, such an account of inner origins can never be well founded. Without reference to outward criteria, who is to say what a person’s inner basis for their outward expressions might be?

We have, then, in an individualistic subjectivist approach to language, the highlighting of a ceaseless process of creativity, and its realization in a speaker’s continual modification of abstract forms (if any such exist) to suit their own unique purposes. Voloshinov picks up on precisely these aspects of this approach. He suggests that “what is important about a linguistic form is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign” (p.68); what matters about an utterance in practice, “is not at all its self-identity as signal but its specific variability” (p.69) – for, as we noted above, the task of understanding an utterance “amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity” (p.68). But what he rejects in individualistic subjectivism, is its focus on the individual monologic utterance, the locating of the influences shaping it solely within the individual speaker. It is the unique way in which a speaker’s utterance is dialogically or relationally responsive to the others and othernesses in its surroundings in the course of its uttering that matters to him. As Bakhtin (1986) puts it, “… expression does not inhere in the word itself. It originates at the point of contact between the word and actual reality, under the conditions of that real situation articulated by the individual utterance” (p.88).
To appreciate the extent of the responsive influences that can be at work here, and the way in which they ‘show up’ in our utterances, we can turn to an example Voloshinov (1987) gives elsewhere. He writes of two Russians sitting silently in a room. One of them says, “Well!” The other does not respond. For us, as outsiders, this entire ‘conversation in miniature’ is utterly incomprehensible. In isolation, the utterance “Well!,” no matter how expressively intoned, is empty and unintelligible. But if we add that at the time it took place, both interlocutors knew that it was already May and that it was high time for spring to come; both were sick and tired of the protracted winter; and both were looking forward to the spring. Thus, in these circumstances, when they looked up at the window and saw that it had begun to snow, both were bitterly disappointed.

“On the ‘jointly seen’ (snowflakes outside the window), ‘jointly known’ (time of year - May) and ‘unanimously evaluated’ (winter wearied of, spring looked forward to) - on all this the utterance directly depends, all this is seized in its actual living import - its very sustenance. And yet all this remains without verbal specification of articulation. The snowflakes remain outside the window; the date, on the page of the calendar; the evaluation, in the psyche of the speaker; and nevertheless, all this is assumed in the word well” (p.99).

It is in the “evaluative accent” of their utterances that speakers’s responsively shape the overall character of their relations to their surroundings. And it is from within such initial evaluative orientations that the meaning of all else in an exchange is understood. “It is evaluation, after all,” notes Voloshinov (1986), “which determines that a particular referential meaning may enter the purview of speakers - both the immediately prior purview and the broader social purview of the particular social group” (p.105). The intonation of the word well, in the ‘movement’ in its unfolding expression, not only voiced passive dissatisfaction with an occurring event (the snowfall), but also active indignation and reproach. “This tack of the intonational movement patently makes an opening in the situation for a third participant. Who is this third participant?” Voloshinov (1987) asks – if it is not the snow. As we have already seen, it is “the organizing center” out in the situation of the utterance. Like a third living, but invisible super-participant in the interaction, it shapes participant’s utterances as in their acting they are responsive to its ‘calls’.

In his appreciation of individualistic subjectivism, Voloshinov thus picks out the creative importance, not of patterns or forms, but of expressions. Indeed, the repetition of fixed forms as such as not that easy to observe. While he mentions form or forms, it is their “specific variability” that matters here. For individualistic subjectivism, the fact that language does have a set of stable, accumulated forms to draw upon is not at all central: for it, style precedes grammar. It is important though, that in our cultural history, various creative individuals have added to that accumulation, thus enriching the stable resources available to us all for articulating our expressions in more subtle and detailed ways. But, as this first trend sees it, forms in language accumulate in an unrelated fashion; they lack systematicity. To repeat: the organizing center is located in the deep interior of the individual, and the creations of the individual are utterly capricious. Voloshinov (1986) sums up the attitude of IS in this respect as follows: “Language as a ready-made product (ergon), as a stable system (lexicon, grammar, phonetics), is, so to speak, the inert crust, the hardened lava of language creativity...” (p.48). Again, Voloshinov gives us here a powerful image to orient us responsively toward crucial features of the landscape here.

III: Abstract Objectivism

The systematicity of linguistic forms is, of course, the central feature of abstract objectivism, the second trend. Instead of the organizing center of linguistic phenomena being in the individual speaker, here it shifts “to an entirely different factor – to the linguistic system as a system of the phonetic, grammatical and lexical forms of language” (p.52). Just as there is a third participant in the episode recounted above, so here also. Indeed, as Voloshinov (1986) recounts it, for this second trend, “language stands before the individual as an inviolable, incontestable norm which the individual, for his part, can only accept... The individual acquires the system of language from his speech community completely ready-made. Any change within that system lies beyond the range of his individual consciousness” (p.53) – and individual speakers must conform in their speaking to ‘its’ requirements. The fact that we cannot just talk as we please, clearly, is an outstanding fact of language use for us. We cannot easily ignore it. But how should we make sense of that fact? Unless, seemingly, we make use of recognizably shared and stable forms of speech – no matter how much we may vary them in their use – without a degree of conformity to such forms, others will not be able to follow us, they will not be able to make sense of
what we say. But what is the mode of existence of such a system; and could it ever as such be the actual organizing center of our utterances?

Although representatives of abstract objectivism constantly stress that the system of language is an objective fact, external to and independent of any individual consciousness, this cannot be its mode of existence. As Voloshinov (1986) points out, “as a system of self-identical, immutable norms, it can be perceived in this way only by the individual consciousness and from the point of view of that consciousness” (p.65). In other words, any supposed system in language is not immediately apparent to all speakers; it is an intellectual abstraction, and is only arrived with a good deal of trouble, and with a definite cognitive goal in mind: the identification of a coherent set of abstract elements and the construction of a single order of connectedness amongst them. Thus, what we take to be the system of language, is the product of a certain kind of deliberation on language carried out by experts. The concerns of an ordinary speaker in a particular concrete situation, are quite different. Indeed, as we know, different experts can arrive at quite different versions of what the system of language is supposed to be. What matters to a speaker, Voloshinov (1986) remarks, “is applying a normatively identical form (let us grant there is such a thing for the time being) in some particular, concrete context. For him, the center of gravity lies not in the identity of the form but in that new and concrete meaning it acquires in the particular context. What the speaker values is not that aspect of the form which is invariably identical in all instances of its usage, despite the nature of those instances, but that aspect of the linguistic form because of which it can figure in the given, concrete context, because of which it becomes a sign adequate to the conditions of the given, concrete situation” (pp.67-68).

But, is there really a system as such here at all? Is it really the case that there is a single, central, systematic, impersonal source of influence shaping people’s conduct, over which they themselves have no control whatsoever? Voloshinov (1986) suggests not. Rather than a single, fixed, systematic source of influence, externally shaping what we say, to repeat, Voloshinov suggests that the relevant norms are ‘there’ at work in the moment-by-moment changing circumstances of our talk. Indeed, Voloshinov (1986) argues, “if we were to look at language in a truly objective way - from the side, so to speak, or more accurately, from above it, we would discover no inert system of self-identical norms. Instead, we would find ourselves witnessing the ceaseless generation of language norms” (p.66). From a truly objective point of view (if such were at all possible) – that is, not from the point of view of an individual speaker/listener already belonging to some particular language group, fixed at a single moment in time, relying on the ability they already possess to recognize what a language is for human beings – no such synchronic system of language may be said to exist. As already mentioned above, seen from a truly objective standpoint, completely apart from how its appears to any given individual responsively involved at any given moment with the others around them (if that were at all possible), “language presents the picture of ceaseless becoming” (p.56).

Again, Voloshinov (1986) gives us a very nice image in terms of which to orient toward this ‘fixed’ aspect of abstract objectivism while accepting also its ceaseless, changing movement: “If, for the first trend, language is an ever-flowing stream of speech acts in which nothing remains fixed and identical to itself, then, for the second trend, language is the stationary rainbow arched over that stream” (p.52).

So although speakers do comply with the demands of their culture and speak in ways which the others around them can follow, if Voloshinov is correct, the place where the influences are at work which ensure that these demands are met, is neither within the psyche of individual speakers, nor mysteriously imposed on them as an ordered system externally. The demand that we speak in certain ways and not others is ‘there’ in the ‘space’ between us, when we are in responsive contact with the others and othernesses around us in our surroundings. And it is here, in this phenomenon, that we meet the most remarkable of all the special phenomena arising out of people’s dialogically-structured relations to their surroundings. For, as soon as a second living organism responds to the activities of a first, then what the second does cannot be accounted as wholly their own activity - for it is partly shaped by the first’s (after all, it is in response to it). And the first person too, in addressing the second, addresses them as this or that kind of person, that is, they speak responsively to them, in terms of who they take them to be. Thus, although I respond to another’s words as their words, to an extent also, I must respond to them as our words, as just as much mine as your’s, as just as much their’s over there as your’s and mine here. In speaking, in using words, I am always putting to use public property, even if I am, to an extent, putting it to use in my own way.

Voloshinov (1986) puts this issue thus: “Each and every word expresses the ‘one’ in relation to the
‘other’. I give myself verbal shape from another’s point of view, ultimately from the point of view of the community to which I belong... Aside from the fact that words as sign is a borrowing on the speaker’s part from the social stock of available signs, the very manipulation of this social sign is a concrete utterance which is wholly determined by social relations” (p.86). It is as if there is present is every situation in which we use words, use expressions established in our cultural history, says Bakhtin (1986), “a superperson, a supra-I, the witness and the judge of the whole human being, of the whole I, and consequently someone who is no longer the person, no longer the I but the other (p.137)". It is this "superaddressee" (Bakhtin, 1986, p.126), this public evaluator, that/who ‘calls’ me to use to use our words as we use them, not the other immediately before me. But to resist its calls, to find that other possibilities exist for the use of words that we have not yet noticed, is a possibility always open to me. The system of language is not external to us; it is we who have developed it, and it is we who can develop it further.

Indeed, if the language system did stand before us externally, implacable in its imposition of impersonal norms upon us, then would be difficult to see how our own human contributions to its change and development might be affected: there could be no living connection between the present state of the system of language and its history, between its current structure and the various ways in which we might vary that structure according to the uses to which we might put it. “At this point,” notes Voloshinov (1986), “we come upon a cardinal difference between the first and second trends in the philosophy of language.” For the first trend, individualistic subjectivism, “the very essence of language is revealed precisely in its history; the logic of language is not at all a matter of reproducing a normatively identical form but of continuous renovation and individualization of that form via the stylistically unrepresentable utterance. The reality of language is, in fact, its generation. Complete mutual comprehensibility obtains in language between any given moment in its life and its history” (p.56). In other words, a social group’s language, our language, as an aspect or feature of the internal relations holding us together as a group, is as much a living, growing, and developing aspect of our form of life as any other. And like everything else to do with the our form of life, it only exists as a distinct participant part of that life in its ceaseless dynamic relations with its surroundings. Thus each individual utterance, each moment in the continuously unfolding stream of spontaneously responsive activity between us and our surroundings, in all the complexity of its multidimensional relations to its circumstances, both sustains and changes – sometimes refining and elaborating, sometimes coarsening and degrading – our language.

This, then, is the key to Voloshinov’s thought about the dialogical nature of language: the essential responsiveness of any utterance in relation to its circumstances. Its meaning is in its responsive unfolding movement in the course of its utterance, and that meaning is actively understood by an other in their unfolding responsiveness to that movement. Thus Voloshinov’s (1986) claim – that “any true understanding is dialogic in nature. Understanding is to utterance as one line of a dialogue is to the next” (p.102) – refocuses the direction and character of our attention in our concerns with understanding how communication works between us. Rather than toward mental representations, hidden inside the heads of individuals, externally related to the world around them, Voloshinov turns our attention toward publicly visible events occurring between those participating in communicative exchanges, events which they experience as internally connected with their surroundings. This is a turn away from viewing our surroundings as a neutral container and material resource for our individual actions, to seeing them as a living, organic whole, and as such, exerting ‘calls’ upon us to which we must answer.

IV: Voloshinov and (mostly) Saussure in dialogue

If we try to wall up our linguistically intertwined activities in the tomb of a system, along with them we shut up uneasiness, movement, and the working of contingency. But any thinker’s “final view” is only arrived at after a wandering, responsive journey through consideration after consideration of many other alternatives. And their responses to these alternative remain in their texts. A thinker’s text is much richer in possibilities than the final system that it is supposed to be about. What is also there in their texts, is their particular set of word choices, their concrete examples, their images, and their tone or style of writing – the movement of the ‘pointings out’, the ‘stopings to reflect’, the ‘making of connections’, etc. that is orchestrated in their sequencing of their words as they write. Hence, rather than arguing about what you take another thinker’s system to be and criticizing it for its inadequacies, one of the values of putting their actual words into one’s own text, is in responding to them, we learn their own way or style of responding to their surroundings. We learn the reasons for their choices, why they ignored what we now attend to, and they attended to what we now want to ignore. We can also ourselves
gain, to repeat, a scenic sense of a landscape or a form of life within which such reasons are intelligible, within which they make sense, even if we ourselves want to move off in a different direction. We can gain this kind of sense from our responsive reading of Voloshinov’s text.

As it is, mainly, with abstract objectivism that Voloshinov is in conversation, I will mostly feature his responsive account of it here: Although he states very briefly at the outset, that his primary focus will be on events occurring within the unity of the social milieu and the unity of the immediate social situation very briefly stated at the outset, we can now see that this sets the whole scene for all his subsequent deliberations. We can also see that this is very different from both Saussure’s primary focus, and that of workers in IS. Saussure follows Descartes, and conceives of our inquiries as being rooted in us as rational individuals, able to achieve a self-given, subjective certainty in the clarity and distinctness of our own ideas. As such, he seeks an accurate representation of the system of language as an external, objective entity, as something ‘over there’ which we must just ‘picture’ from a distance. It is its form, its patterned shape, that is important; it does not and need not of itself ‘call out’ any responses from us. But, “in reifying the system of language and in viewing living language as if it were dead and alien, abstract objectivism makes language something external to the stream of verbal communication... [It] excludes any possibility for the speaker’s consciousness to be actively in touch with the process of historical evolution,” says Voloshinov (1986, p.81). As something of a Marxist, concerned with people making history (rather than it being made for them, behind their backs), he cannot in all conscience accept this. But, rather than simply reflecting our own individual desires and intentions as in IS, he sees our unfolding expressions as responsive to the ‘contours’ of their enveloping circumstances, with each articulatory movement originating in its momentary point of contact between ourselves others and othersnesses around us; it is as if we are ‘in touch’ with the historical development of our surroundings. But more than that. He sees our surroundings as responsive to us: we also make our own history. It is not made for us by mysterious systematic agencies working behind our backs.

Saussure, however, impressed like Descartes by geometrical and mathematical reasoning, paid no attention to the responsive relations of our expressions to our surroundings. For them both, our words are arbitrary tokens, with no meaning being given in their individual shaping as such. Like chess pieces, as long as they are stable and distinguishable from each other, and can each be assigned a functional role within a rule-system with a single relational order to it, their meaning can be understood in terms of their role in the system. But as Voloshinov (1986) puts it:

“The idea of the conventionality, the arbitrariness of language, is a typical one for rationalism as a whole, and no less typical is the comparison of language to the system of mathematical signs. What interests the mathematically minded rationalists is not the relationship of the sign to the actual reality it reflects nor to the individual who is its originator, but the relationship of sign to sign within a closed system already accepted and authorized. In other words, they are interested only in the inner logic of the system of signs itself, taken, as in algebra, completely independently of the ideological meanings that give the signs their content. Rationalists are not averse to taking the understander’s viewpoint into account, but are least of all inclined to consider that of the speaker, as the subject expressing his own inner life. For the fact is that the mathematical sign is least amenable to interpretation as an expression of the individual psyche...” (pp.57-58).

In other words, Voloshinov not only sees Saussure’s reason for his choice – in his interest in the inner logic of a system – but he also takes into account its relation to IS: to see the inner logic of a system as a center of organization, precludes the possibility of individuals expressing their own unique inner life, as only what is general and common to all can be expressed from within it.

So, although for Saussure, the autonomous psyche, the individual self, my seem to be the legitimating source for all of our claims to knowledge, it cannot be the organizing center for our utterances and other social practices. For Saussure, everything we do is based in a kind of subjective inner ‘seeing’ of outer ‘object-like’ entities. We give our outer acts their order by inner reference, either explicit or implicit, to an objective system of language. Voloshinov wants to respond to both IS and AO. How can he do this? How can he allow IS its claim that the expression by individuals of their own unique inner lives matters, while at the same time allowing AO to claim that the source of linguistic creativity lies outside of individuals? His answer is as follows: By seeing all our activities as already embedded in an unbroken chain of spontaneously communicative activity,
and by seeing that unceasing flow of activity as being continually shaped and re-shaped by its responsive relations to its surrounding circumstances. And furthermore: Rather than any act as beginning within an individual, he sees them as always beginning with a responsive relation of one or another kind. Thus:

“... the location of the organizing and formative center is not within (i.e., not in the material of inner signs) but outside. It is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around – expression organizes experience. Expression is what first gives experience its form and specificity of direction.

Indeed, from whichever aspect we consider it, expression-utterance is determined by the actual conditions of the given utterance-above all, by its immediate social situation” (p.85).

And to responsively teach us how to see just such an occurrence in its actual happening, he sets out for us a number of concrete examples (pp.88-89): the expression of hunger by “a declassé loner,” by the member of a haphazard “collective” (a peasant, say), and by a member of a “united collective” (a trade unionist, a “class”). Each experiences hunger differently according to whether respectively they express it in a humble, shameful way, a resigned but unashamed and unselfdemeaning way, or in an angry self-confident protest.

To the extent that he gives us here examples to which we ourselves can respond, examples in which, so to speak, we can see ourselves, these examples are not as illustrative of an already existing practice, but as constitutive for a new practice, a way of understanding not previously available to us. In this way, rather than arguing for the truth of his claim – that expression organizes experience – he lets us experience situations in which he can sense it as making sense. Instead of taking an objective view of a circumstance, we are learning what might be called a “participatory way of looking,” a way of looking from within a specific involvement, to notice within it previously unnoticed details.

Crucial here, and in great contrast to Saussure’s emphasis on normatively identical forms, is the emergence into our concerns of what Voloshinov (1986) calls an utterance’s “evaluative accent” (p.21, and pp.80-81). It plays a central role in setting the relational scene of an interaction. The value of an individual utterance, what it achieves, is a matter of the overall activity within which it is embedded. Its value is the difference it makes in that activity, the way in which it reconstitutes it as an activity which now ‘calls for’ yet a further kind of response from the others surrounding the actor. This is completely missed in formal linguistics. As we saw in the example above, in which two Russians are experiencing snow still falling in late May, a certain overall, active relation to an addressee is established in the intonational contour of the utterance “Well!”. The speaker expresses, not only a passive dissatisfaction at the snow falling, but also an active indignation and reproach. He acts as if he wants some recompense, some compensation; he calls for a restitution of the normal situation; he wants it put right. The second Russian feels called to respond too – let us assume that he just agrees with the first and expresses his agreement in, say, merely an aggrieved look. But for it to be seen as such, as an aggrieved agreement, the second would have to sense themselves as working out from within the scene as set by the first’s responsive expression.

In this example, and in the previous example – to do with people’s different expressions of hunger – rather than Voloshinov’s words having a meaning in themselves for us, rather than working to construct a completely new situation from the ground up, they are being used to make a difference within a concrete situation of a kind already, to a certain degree, specified. For we can all, so to speak, find the kind of ways in which we are moved by, or must move ourselves to deal with, the situations instanced above, resonate with other such movements of our own. We see ourselves in such movements. Thus, claims Voloshinov (1986):

“Verbal communication can never be understood and explained outside of [its] connection with a concrete situation... In its concrete connection with a situation, verbal communication is always accompanied by social acts of a nonverbal character (the performance of labor, the symbolic acts of a ritual, a ceremony, etc.), and is often only an accessory to these acts, merely carrying out an auxilliary role. Language acquires life and historically evolves precisely here, in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language forms, nor in the individual psyche of speakers”(p.95).

For Voloshinov (1986) then, like Wittgenstein (1969) and unlike Saussure (1911/1959), it is not willful and intellectual acts that lie at the heart of our actual speech acts, but the fact that such acts are always already
rooted in a to-an-extent already specified, concrete situation. Thus no matter how well formed and complete in itself an utterance is, it is only a moment in the continuous, spontaneous process of relationally-responsive, social interaction. And any such moment is itself, in turn, only a moment in the continuous, all-inclusive, generative process of a given social collective. Given their temporality, such moments can never be considered as separate, self-contained elements of reality, and talked of as related to each other externally, as joined together by a third thing. The sequential unfolding of any specific, individual utterance is always responsive to, and thus expressive of, aspects of its extra-verbal surroundings, on the one hand. And on the other, if they are to be properly dialogical, they must always be such as to ‘call to’ the others around one for a next response. Our utterances are only ever a refinement, elaboration, or further specification of meanings in a flow of activity already present.

Voloshinov (1986) shows this yet again in another example. He uses an episode (used also by Vygotsky, 1986, for a somewhat similar purpose) out of Dostoevsky’s “Diary of a Writer,” as constitutive for our understanding here. In the example, “six tipsy artisans” walking home in the small hours, conduct an exchange consisting of the same obscenity voiced by all six in different ways. The word was for them, “only a vehicle for intonation. The conversation was conducted in intonations expressing the value judgments of the speakers. These value judgments and their corresponding intonations were wholly determined by the immediate social situation of the talk and therefore did not require any referential support” (p.104). But what convinces us of this? How do we gain a sense of the differences in question? Well, the same way that Dostoevsky himself was stuck by the possibility of such a phenomenon. As Dostoevsky notes, “I chanced to find myself walking alongside six tipsy artisans for a dozen paces or so, and there became convinced that all thoughts, all feelings, and even whole trains of reasoning could be expressed merely by using a certain noun, a noun, moreover of utmost simplicity in itself. Here is what happened” (quoted by Voloshinov, 1986, p.103). And what is crucial, of course, but is too extensive to repeat here, is the unfolding sequential structure, and the moving, arresting, striking way in which Dostoevsky ‘touches’ or ‘contacts’ us with his words so that we too sense what the six tipsy artisans were expressing.

Here, then, we touch upon issues to do with people’s moment by moment changing motivations and expectations in an exchange – the different pushes and pulls they feel themselves subject to, and the different barriers and openings to their moves available to them in different circumstances. In their occurrence as constitutive moments in a larger, ongoing, living movement, our utterances never relate to our surroundings as something totally given and complete. There is always a yet-to-be-determined, yet-to-be-achieved aspect to our relations to our surroundings. Indeed, they have their own requirements, exert their own calls upon us: we find ourselves feeling that ‘one ought to...’, ‘it is desirable that...’ and so on. In taking an evaluative attitude toward my surroundings, I not only determine what aspects are to count for me as things or objects, and which will not, but in expressing my evaluative attitude in my intonation, I express what is desirable or undesirable in them, and, in doing so, indicate what for me is yet to-to-be determined about them. Thus, as Voloshinov (1986) claims, evaluation “determines that a particular referential meaning may enter the purview of speakers – both the immediate purview and the broader social purview of the particular social group... The separation of word meaning from evaluation inevitably deprives meaning of its place in the living social process (where meaning is always permeated with value judgment)...” (p.105).

It is here, then, that we can find the major difference between Voloshinov and Saussure, and also any other approaches which adopt an individualistic account of meaning. But is a difference that is played out twice, both in his text, and in our reading of it. While Saussure, and the individualistic subjectivists, both suggest that meaning can be found in the actions of individuals alone, whether as creative expression or as systematic production, Voloshinov shows (more than argues) that this is not the case. Our embedding in, and living responsive relations to, our surroundings matter. But much more than that. At any one moment, as uniquely fashioned and distinguishable parts of an undivided whole, our expressions are always a constituent part of a larger, still developing, still unfinished, living whole. In their shaping, our expressions need to satisfy “its” requirements also. Hence Voloshinov’s (1986) remark, that “if we were to look at language in a truly objective way – from the side, so to speak, or more accurately, from above it, we would discover no inert system of self-identical norms. Instead, we would find ourselves witnessing the ceaseless generation of language norms” (pp.65-66).

In other words, no single, finalized system of norms can ever capture how, properly, we must order our talk if the others around us are to follow us. For we must fashion it according to the circumstances between us,
not according to an already existing system of norms. So, although in a passive sense, we may think of ourselves as limited in what we can say prior to opening our mouths, so the expression of our own unique individuality is denied us, as active, living, responsive beings, we find things to be somewhat different. While we are limited in that we cannot just use publicly owned words as we please, within their partially specified use, they are still open to an indefinite range of further specifications. While we are also limited by the unique requirements of the immediate social situation, we are free to shape our use of public words in response to the unique calls upon us and upon us alone. For no one else has quite the same place in existence, in the network of relations between us, as each of us individually. But if others are unable to follow us, to respond to us intelligibly, then we must, and can, vary our utterances in a back-and-forth, responsive fashion until an understanding satisfactory to all involved is achieved – with each variation guided by an inner sense of the moment-by-moment changing landscape of possible variations shared by all involved.

V. The Dialogical

The ceaseless and momentary generation and re-generation of norms in our joint or dialogically-structured activities, because it is never completed or finished and is always being renewed in new circumstances, cannot easily be described. Indeed, our systems of reference, rather than underlying the moves we make in the overall movement of our lives, are dependent upon that movement and draw their value form their place within it. Thus, as Wittgenstein (1969) says: “Giving grounds, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not in certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game” (no.204). Where, “you must bear in mind,” he continues, “that the language-game is... not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there - like our life” (no.559). But we can only make sense of such remarks as these from within our responsive involvements in our relations to others. Any attempt to make sense of language and of its mode of existence through the imposition of an external framework is bound to fail; it fails to capture the life of our signs.

Here, then, we can return to Voloshinov’s starting point – in the “unity of the social milieu and the unity of the immediate social event of communication” – and examine more deeply the strange nature of a dialogically-structured world as a unity, as an invisible whole. I want also to explore what it means for us to assume that everything of importance only has its meaning for us from within such an indivisible unity26. For, if Voloshinov (1986) is right, and “… understanding is a response to signs with signs,” and furthermore, if “this chain of ideological creativity and understanding, moving from sign to sign and then to a new sign, is perfectly consistent and continuous,” then, as he claims, “nowhere is there a break in the chain, nowhere does the chain plunge into inner being, nonmaterial in nature and unembodied in signs” (p.11)27. In other words, we are always, inevitably, embedded in one or another kind of dynamically unfolding, responsive relationship; for us, they are foundational. The dialogically-structured relationships within which we are involved, not us as individuals, nor our individual consciousnesses, are constitutive of the significance of the events occurring around us. If this is so, then not only does Voloshinov’s work suggest a whole new way of conceiving of our relations to our surroundings, and thus of ourselves, but also, that the meaning of every one of our major philosophical words – words like language, word, meaning, understanding, knowledge, self, person, mind (psyche), consciousness, thinking, world, etc., etc. – all need, as we shall see, re-thinking; they need re-constituting in a dialogical or participatory version rather than in a representational or referential form.

As already mentioned above, the key to Voloshinov’s dialogical approach to the nature of language and to our utterances, is the idea of responsive understanding. “Meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding. Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener” (p.102). My words are given an active, responsive meaning in how you respond to them. Thus, “word,” says Voloshinov (1986), “is two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant... Each and every word expresses the ‘one’ in relation to the ‘other’” (p.86). But as soon as this occurs, as soon as a second living human being responds to the activities of a first, then what the second does cannot be accounted as wholly their own activity – for the second acts in a way that is partly ‘shaped’ by the first (and the first’s acts were responsive to the presence of the second, as their addressee, also). Thus, activity of this kind between us, as we have already seen, immediately takes on a public quality. Although occurring between you and me, such activity is neither wholly your activity nor wholly mine; it is our’s.
But more than that. In growing up among a crowd of others who already react and respond to each other in characteristic ways in their practical, everyday affairs, I too become very practiced in anticipating their responses to my expressions. Thus, it is not just that we in our situation here must respond to each other’s words as our words, but we must also respond to our words as being just as much the words of those others over there too. For the current, small scale interaction between us now, is itself embedded as a constituent or participant moment in the unceasing larger flow of responsive expressiveness, in the chain of spontaneously responsive activity endlessly flowing in the background to our lives. Indeed, even when acting alone, what I do must be dialogically, and thus internally, related in some way to what, overall, a we of some kind is doing. It draws its significance from its existence as a constituent or participant part of a larger whole. Thus, as already mentioned, it seems as if “each dialogue [or, dialogically-structured activity] takes place as if against the background of an invisible third party [an ‘it’] who stands above all the participants in the dialogue (partners)” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.126). It not my responses themselves that matter nor yours, but the relations between them. And only if you respond to me in a way sensitive to the relations between your actions and mine can we act together as a collective ‘we’; but if I sense you as not being sensitive in this way, then shall feel offended. It is in this sphere where the relations between our actions take on a life of their own, so to speak, that all the strangeness of the dialogically-structured joint action, begins28.

It constitutes a third realm of activity quite distinct from the two others familiar to us in the social and behavioral sciences: the realm of action and the realm of behavior. To the extent that everything done by any of the individuals involved in it is done in spontaneous response to the others or othernesses around them, we cannot hold any of them individually responsible for its outcome: it thus lacks a reason. It cannot be accounted within the realm of action. Yet, it cannot be traced back to any influences acting on them externally: it is produced only by ‘their’ activity, and ‘they’ collectively are responsible for it. Thus it cannot be explained merely in causal terms: it cannot be accounted as merely a behavioral phenomenon either. What we produce between us is a very complex mixture of not wholly reconcilable influences as Bakhtin (1981) remarks, at work within it are both ‘centripetal’ tendencies (inward toward order and unity), as well as ‘centrifugal’ ones (outward toward diversity and difference). Influences from vision, touch, hearing, taste, and smell, as well as our body senses, our own and our responses to those of others, are all mixed in together -- any bodily activities to which others might respond can become sign material. It is in fact a complex mixture of many different kinds of influences. This makes it very difficult for us to characterize its nature: it has neither a fully orderly nor a fully disorderly structure, a neither completely stable nor an easily changed organization, a neither fully subjective nor fully objective character. Indeed, we could say that it is its very lack of complete specificity, its lack of any fully-determined human order, and thus its openness to being specified or determined yet further by those involved in it, in practice, is one of its central defining feature.

Orchestrated in with its generally responsive nature are moments of deliberation and decision: as in a fast game of tennis one decides to move to the net; or when driving one’s car to change lanes; or when approaching another person to bit one’s tongue and not be critical; and so on. Interspersed in with wholly spontaneous moments of responsiveness are certain brief moments in which we, as free agents, choose. But even in these moment, we cannot just act as we please, it is as if our choices must be made from within already specified limits. Something seems exert a compelling force on participants in dialogically-structured joint action, to act in certain ways rather than others. As we have seen above, when people enter into dialogically structured responsive relations with each other, more than simply the ‘one’ becoming related to the ‘other’, an overarching ‘third’ being begins to be created, a dynamically unfolding indivisible whole, unique to the moment, begins to emerge. It is this, along with openness to being further articulated, internally, that makes dialogically structured relations so special. Indeed, it is only from within such unique, momentary wholes, that our utterances in fact have their meaning. How should we understand such wholes? What is their mode of existence?

William James (1897/1956), concerned with the achievement of a comprehensive sense of ‘how things hang together’, used our sense of the space in which we live our lives, as one of “the three great continua in which for each of us reason’s ideal is actually reached” (p.264) - the continua of memory or personal consciousness, being the other two. In making this proposal, as we shall see, he provides an account of our spatial surroundings of a kind very different from the concept of space in the classical view. Ideally, like Wittgenstein (1953), James suggests, we would like to achieve in every sphere of our lives, whether in thought or in practical action, the capability of ‘knowing our way about’ within that sphere without becoming confused.
or disoriented: “In the realm of every ideal,” suggests James (1897/1956), “we can begin anywhere and roam over the field, each term passing us to its neighbor, each member calling for the next, and our reason rejoicing in its glad activity. Where the parts of a conception seem thus to belong to each other by inward kinship, where the whole is defined in a way congruous with our powers of reaction, to see is to approve and understand” (p.264). Our ordinary, everyday, living experience of space is thus, for us, a paradigm of such an ideal. He described its indivisible unity thus: “It is a unit. No force can in any way break, wound, or tear it... To make a hole in it you must drive something else through. But what can you drive through space except what is itself spatial? But notwithstanding it is this very paragon of unity, space in its parts contains an infinite variety, and the unity and the variety do not contradict each other, for they obtain in different respects. The one is the whole, the many are the parts... [And] beyond the parts we see or think at any given time extend further parts; but the beyond is homogeneous with what is embraced... Thus with space our intelligence is absolutely intimate; it is rationality and transparency incarnate... [We] may truly say that when we desiderate rational knowledge of the world the standard set by our knowledge of space is what governs our desire” (pp.265-266).

Indeed, as James brings out in his description above, our ordinary, everyday experience of the space around us is of a dynamically changing space, with, so to speak, a grammar to it: occupying any place within it, we experience calls from the places around us in terms, he says, of our powers of reaction. Thus, rather than an inert, homogeneous space, everywhere the same – the space of Descartes and Kant as a neutral container for our individual actions – the spaces in which we live our everyday lives, as James describes them, are living spaces, spaces each with a distinctive character or ‘shape’ to them, constituting, as Wittgenstein (1953, 1980) puts it, “a landscape.” But we must be careful here, not to fall into the trap of conceiving such ‘shaped spaces’ as static forms, as forms which could be ever be pictured, overall, by standing back from them. I do not experience the space before me simply as a dead shape or form needing deliberate interpretation by me. But rather, ‘it’ spontaneously offers me, as it were, a set of ‘action guiding advisories’, a ‘shaped and vectored sense’ of where I am, where I have come from, and where I can (and should) go next. Such a ‘landscape’ is an invisible structure of responsive relations, and we can only come to know it as such through our responsive reactions to its ‘parts’ as we progressively encounter them in our movement through it.

Indeed, at this point, it may be useful to switch from the image of a landscape to that of a text: for similarly, we cannot experience a text’s meaning by standing back from it and simply trying to see an overall pattern in its word forms. A text’s meaning only comes to presence for us if we approach its word forms with a certain stance toward them, with a preparedness to be responsive to them. And, if we do, as James indicates, each word form we encounter and respond to, calls for the next. Thus, as we move responsively through the text’s word forms, with each form in our responsive understanding of it ‘pointing or gesturing toward’ the whole, the text’s meaning, within which it is a participant part, begins to emerge. But rather than something visible, it is a felt unity, an immediately felt living presence that exerts cert...

Conclusions

We have, then, moved into a new world. Instead of world of externally related parts only in mechanical motion, i.e., in motion from one place to another, we have moved into a world in a very different kind of motion. Instead of a world of things and substances, we find ourselves as having our being within a living world of internally related, dialogically-structured events, events with their own unfolding, inner movement. Within the unfolding of such dialogically-structured events, other events (events which are other to each other), play into each other in a complexly ‘orchestrated’ movement to create further, such new and unique events. And, in the inner movement within such events, rather than the mere locomotion of a set of constant, externally related parts into a new configuration, we have – at least for a moment – a metamorphosis of a wholistic event into new whole,
i.e., there is a complex movement in which, in the intertwining of events, a new dynamic form is created. It thus makes sense to speak of such events both as having an inside and as having a life-cycle, i.e., as emerging into life, as then spontaneously expressing, for a duration, responsive reactions related to accumulations from the past embodied within them, and then as dying, to continue on as a finalized and dead form, no longer with an inner life or able to relate spontaneously and responsively to other events. In being mutually responsive to each other in this way, nature’s units – if we can still call them that, for they are not physically separable – are all mutually constitutive.

In other words, as they come into existence, such events play into, and are played into by, the events around them. Thus each “unit” (the utterance of a word, say) is constituted by the incursion of an otherness into its self-identity. Such a world as this – as Voloshinov makes clear – is not a world which can be sensed by the eyes, fingers, or ears. Another kind of sensing entirely is required, a sensing of an inner wholistic kind. While, “the eyes see nothing and there is nothing for the hands to touch,” (p.45), the ear might seem to be at an advantage, as “it can claim to hear a word” (p.45). But the sound heard in one’s ears, as an isolated acoustic phenomenon, can only be sensed as a word if is understood, in some way, as a participant part of a larger, indivisible whole, to which it must be internally related. The precise character of an other’s or othernesses’s incursion into a word’s self-identity, can only be sensed in this complex, wholistic way, from within the unfolding movement of our living involvements with the others and othernesses around us. It is the shaped and vectored nature of this inner, sensuous movement, and the compelling nature of the calls it exerts upon us – what ‘it’ moves us to say or do – rather than the perception of any outer forms or properties observed through our separate senses, that shapes our spontaneous and responsive reactions to events in our surroundings.

This is what we can gain from a reading of Voloshinov’s work. We can gain a sense of what it is like to conduct our own living activities while in communicative contact with the others around us in this way. We can gain a sense of what it is like to act while guided by the sense of a shared world which only makes its appearance between us in a momentary way, a shared world of a particular and fleeting kind which arises from shared feelings being given a shared significance in briefly shared circumstances. This living world of language, the world in which our words have their life and their uttering plays a participant part in the unfolding of our lives together, the world of the present moment rather than a world of enduring things, is a world of once-occurrent events of Being” (Bahktin, 1993). The world of enduring things, we now realize, is only an aspect this world. It is the aspect we see when we look back, so to speak, on the finished, but now dead products of such once-occurrent events. Our living world is thus much, much more complex. But we can only find it within the living moments of its existence, from within our living involvements with our surroundings. It is this that previously we have missed.

What Voloshinov teaches us, then, is that it is only from within our living, spontaneously responsive relations to our surroundings, that we can find the true roots or foundations of our shared understandings. But that a grounding is not something simply established once and as fixed for all time, but that it arises and has its being in different ways at different moments in different kinds of circumstances. It is this which makes argument between us possible. If there was no shared shaped and vectored sense of a shared circumstance between us, working to shape and direct our spontaneous reactions to each other’s utterances, then (even more than at present) our so-called arguments would pass each other by: answers could not be sensed as replies to questions; ... could not be sensed as...; there could be no intricate argument about details. No intelligible way to articulate both one’s opponent’s position and one’s own such that readers could see what it was one was arguing about...

In the past, we have thought it appropriate to attempt to understand ourselves in terms of what we know about the world around us. Here, adopting Voloshinov’s approach to our understanding of our own human, bodily responsive activities, and treating ourselves as naturally participant parts of a larger, indivisible whole, we have essentially begun to understand our surroundings in terms of what we know to be the case about ourselves. If we can responsively create links, connections, or relations between ourselves and other events distant in space and time from ourselves, to form a new, indivisible, dialogically-structured, unitary event (as we do in a piece of writing, say), then so can other events in our surroundings. Again, rather than a merely in a world of simply located, spatially separated elements of reality, subject only to local causation, i.e., elements with a self-contained character independent of all the other elements in reality around them, we find ourselves in a wholly interconnected world of living events, related in some way that goes well beyond our current understanding of merely mechanical causation.
We are now at a point where we must begin to draw some conclusions. Clearly, the results of Voloshinov's explorations are not at all easy to summarize. They are inherently extensive, contradictory, incomplete, vague, ambiguous, and provisional – to repeat, they provide new beginnings, and have little to say about final end states. To try to sum up what he has to say as "his system," would be to ignore many of the rich possibilities for our responsive understanding he provides us from within our reading of his text. Indeed, to sum it up thus would be a travesty. It would be to turn away from the whole attempt "to get the feel of the actual subject matter – the object under investigation" just at that moment when one should be attempting to integrate all the scenic 'views', all the separate events sensed in one's encounters on one's journey through his text, into a synoptic sense of a whole landscape. We need to arrive at that kind of shaped and vectored sense of our living linguistic involvements that we have of a house, a town, a city, as we become familiar with it in living our lives, in all their complex aspects, within it.

However, Voloshinov (1986, p.98) does sum up his own dialogical view. And we can see how he draws on the positive features of both individualistic subjectivism and abstract objectivism in so doing. He attempts "to formulate [his] own point of view in the following set of propositions:

1. *Language as a stable system of normatively identical forms is merely a scientific abstraction,* productive only in connection with certain particular practical and theoretical goals. This abstraction is not adequate to the concrete reality of language.
2. *Language is a continuous generative process implemented in the social-verbal interaction of speakers.*
3. *The laws of the generative process of language are not at all the laws of individual psychology, but neither can they be divorced from the activity of speakers.* The laws of language generation are sociological laws.
4. *Linguistic creativity does not coincide with artistic creativity nor with any other type of specialized ideological creativity.* But, at the same time, *linguistic creativity cannot be understood apart from the ideological meanings and values that fill it.* The generative process of language, as is true of any historical generative process, can be perceived as blind mechanical necessity, but it can also become "free necessity" once it has reached the position of a conscious and desired necessity.
5. *The structure of the utterance is a purely sociological structure.* The utterance, as such, obtains between speakers. The individual speech act (in the strict sense of the word "individual") is *contradictio in adjecto"*(p.98).

But as we already seen, to make such a set of propositions central in an account of what we can learn from Voloshinov would be to ignore what else he can teach us as we respond to what he responds to in his text. It is necessary to read the whole of his text, to return to it from time to time, to explore different portions of it in depth – as one might explore a region of a city not yet fully familiar to us – if we are to benefit in this way from his writings. Its importance is in its details and their sequencing, and in our shaped and vectored sense of these.

In the course of responsively following his textual travels, from piecing together the countless understandings about language and its use we can gain from it\(^2\), we can begin to gain a scenic or synoptic sense of a whole landscape or a form of life within which we can, to an extent, feel 'at home'. And rather than arguing as to whether he has provided an accurate analysis of it or not, we must ask ourselves a very different kind of question, a practical rather than a theoretical question: Is his dialogical account of such a kind that we can put aspects of it back into particular starting points of our own – back into what is present to us in a particular interactive moment of importance to us – to refine and elaborate what we already understand from within it? For if we can, that will allow us to go on to conduct our practical dealings with each other in such circumstances in a more refined manner. Indeed, the process may be iterated over and over again, to provide further sets of provisional, internally articulated understandings, each one, hopefully, richer and more accurate in detail than the previous. Under the designation of the methods of a social poetics, Arlene Katz and I have explored the workings of such a way of proceeding in a number of different practical settings (Katz and Shotter, 1996a; Katz and Shotter, 1996b; Shotter and Katz, 1996; Shotter, 1998; Katz, 2000).

Such dialogical, relationally-responsive understandings are not to do with gaining a passive picture, standing ‘over there', that can be seen as providing an accurate depiction of a state of affairs\(^3\). To repeat, they are to do with knowing our ‘way around' inside our language entwined forms of life in an unconfused manner, being able to move around inside their complicated landscapes without coming up against dead-ends, to be ‘at
home’ within them without any need of maps. For, as we have seen, one major change we make as we move to understanding a dialogically-structured reality from within, rather than a pictorial reality from outside, is finding that such a reality exerts momentary calls on us. Indeed, to the extent that it is a reality that is sustained by verbal accounts, the calls it exerts on us are of a publicly evaluated kind – we feel the pressure of us of norms. But its nature is not a matter of argument and interpretation, of decision and debate. It is the constitutive background to the rest of our shared projects.

Ordinarily, in our training as academics, as we noted above, we learn to function within a somewhat systematized set of shared background understandings, which we rely on in orienting each other toward the meaning of the questions we raise in relation to “the subject matter” of our discipline. However, that set of understandings is not often itself critically examined. Indeed, as the condition of us meaning something to each other, it is usually left completely ignored in the background. For we cannot easily turn it around to make it an object of our disciplinary attention. Yet, as we have seen, we assume that it has a special character to it that shapes and limits what we can, as academics, say and do within it: We talk amongst ourselves as if the world in which our discipline’s subject matter exists, is primarily a spatial world, a world that can be pictured – indeed, it is of the world as a picture. And its pictorial character biases us toward talking of things as if made up of static, self-contained elements of reality, existing only in external relations to each other; and to talking of change as if taking place in a series of stop-and-start jerks from one static configuration to another. It also leads us to act as if our task is simply that of arriving at a final correct description of our subject matters, and that the differences between us in our claims in this respect can be settled by critical analysis and debate.

This is a view of the world that became enshrined in classical physics, it is the mechanical world of “middle dimensions,” in which we conduct our daily practical affairs, the world in which we “lift that block and move that pail.” In such a world as this, it is very difficult for us to think in terms of unceasing fluid movement and qualitative change. It is a world of dead unchanging forms. I called it the classical view. But now we must emphasize that not only it is a view, but it is a view from an uninvolved or disengaged stance. While we can come to an understanding of dead forms on the basis of our external observations of their behavior, a quite different kind of engaged, responsive understanding becomes available to us with living forms, from within our relationships with them. They can call out spontaneous reactions from us in way that is quite impossible for dead forms. It is this that makes these two kinds of understanding so very different from each other. We study finished and dead forms at a distance, seeking to understand the pattern of past events that caused them to come into existence. But in entering into a relationship with a living form and, in making ourselves open to its movements, we can begin to understand it in terms of its meaning for us, i.e., in terms of our spontaneous responses to it (Shotter, 1993). Rather than us unresponsively observing it as an object, it becomes responsively present to us as “an Other” with its own unified inner nature. Thus, we could say, that while we make sense of our surroundings in terms of objective things in a classical reality, others and othernesses become present to us in a participatory reality. And further: That while a classical reality is publicly accessible in an ‘objective’ sense to all those able to adopt a disinterested stance toward their surroundings, a participatory reality is publicly present to all those able, so to speak, to see its relational landscape, to enter into an appropriate set of interested relations with it. It is this, that I think is so special about Voloshinov’s dialogically-structured, participatory mode of inquiry.

In drawing our attention to our interested, responsive relations to our surroundings, Voloshinov implicitly draws on something special about us which I think has been ignored for far too long in the social and behavioral sciences: As living, embodied beings, we live our lives embedded in an intricate flow of complexly intertwined, relationally-responsive, spontaneously occurring activity. I do not just experience the scene before me as a dead shape or pictorial form needing deliberate interpretation by me, but as I move around in living relation to my surroundings, I experience them as spontaneously offering me, as it were, a set of ‘action guiding advisories’, a ‘shaped and vectored sense’ of where I am, where I have come from, and where I can (and should) go next. This is a world with a character very different from the classical world. While Saussure (and Chomsky) view language as an “organizing device” already existing as a complete system somewhere out in a static, spatial world of idealized forms, a second symbolic world upon which we draw in shaping our actions in the world of our everyday lives, Voloshinov treats us as living and acting in a single, dynamically unfolding, still developing world. Thus, rather than a world of separate, externally related parts, it is a world articulated into a set of internally related, participant parts, all responsively playing out their relations to each other. In such a world as this, our utterances – and also our thoughts and ideas, our sensings and imaginings – are just as much of and in the world as the rest of our other material, bodily activities. They do not belong to another ethereal,
symbolic world that we must, by the power of mind, bring into correspondence the other, material world. In their responsive relations to their surroundings, they are already internally related to them. For it is, to repeat, “the immediate social situation and the broader social milieu [that] wholly determine – and determine from within, so to speak – the structure of an utterance” (Voloshinov, 1986, p.86).

This distinction between an indivisible living whole, which is articulated from within itself, in the course of its living, into a now more complexly structured indivisible whole, and an abstract systematic whole, which exhibits a single, logical order of connectedness and is structured as a closed system or assemblage of parts, which becomes a whole only as the last part is put in place, is crucial. The parts of a living unity are indivisible from the whole within which they have their being. They are all *internally* related in that they owe, not just their character but their very existence at every moment, not only to their relations to the other parts within the whole, but also to its earlier parts from which they have developed – thus, as well as their momentary spatial relations, their temporal (historical, developmental, or genetic) relations are of importance also. Further, the living whole itself owes aspects of its character to its (dynamic) relations to its surroundings. However, for Saussure, and all those other workers who treat grammar as an “organizing device,” language and speech exist independently of, and externally to, each other; they both have their own self-contained natures irrespective of whether they are a part of a larger whole or not. In being in an external relation to each other, they are linked by a third thing, by a ‘mapping’ relation, a relation of correspondence, or whatever. Their lack of a spontaneous, responsive relation to each other, however, leaves their relation open to interpretation. Hence Wittgenstein’s (1969) remark that “the idea of ‘agreement with reality’ does not have a clear application” (no.215).

This switch, from talking, thinking, and working in terms externally related assemblages of parts to internally articulated, indivisible but still developing wholes, is radical. The switch from acting as if we can all talk sensibly about putative “elements of reality” existing in a space common to all of us ‘over there’, and the turn to accepting that we can only ever talk of anything *from within* one or another or another ongoing, developing relationship with our surroundings, changes everything. We must change from representational to participatory versions of all our common notions. For instance: *things* – rather than being known in terms of their properties, become known in terms of their aspects, their ‘relational place’ or ‘participatory position’ within a ‘form of life’ or an ‘ecology’ (i.e., within a scheme of inter-relationships); *time* – in a participatory time-space everything remains ‘present’ in the moment and it all irretrievably ‘laters’ together; *space* – in a participatory time-space, everything is related to everything else, our expressions (thoughts) produce responses in our surroundings; *thinking* – is inner response dialogue, not mere calculation; *knowledge* – rather than to do merely with ‘picturing’ is to do with ‘knowing one’s way about’ (where to go, what to do next, etc.); *seeing* – rather than external observation, participatory looking is to do with looking from within one’s involvements in relation to the task in hand, to notice previously unnoticed details; and so on. Of particular note, is the mode of existence of *words*: “Each word... is a little arena for the clash and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual person is a product of the living interaction of social forces” (Voloshinov, 1986, p.41). In a participatory world, everything is fluid and open to further development, nothing is fixed and finished. But more than that: we and our world are one, thus if things around us change, we change also, for we and our surroundings are in internal relation to each other.

What is crucial for us in our inquiries into all of this is, as Wittgenstein (1953) puts it in questioning how it is that our utterances manage to refer to things, that “Nothing is concealed... Nothing is hidden” (no.435). Everything we need if we are to understand the workings of language and of our own mental activities, is out there publicly accessible in the relationally-responsive world between us – if only we have the sensitivities to respond to it. Thus, just like Wittgenstein (1958), who remarks that “thinking is essentially the activity of operating with signs,” (p.6), Voloshinov (1986) also suggests that “the reality of the inner psyche is the same reality as that of the sign” (p.26). Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that “consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs... nowhere is there a break in the chain [of spontaneously responding to a sign with signs], nowhere does the chain plunge into inner being, nonmaterial in nature and unembodied in signs” (p.11). “By its very existential nature, the subjective psyche is to be localized somewhere between the organism and the outside world, on the borderline separating these two spheres of reality” (p.26). Strange though it may be to say it, this means that “the mind” is not a special inner, imaginary space in which our thoughts, perceptions, desires, feelings, understandings, and such, are located. Mind and matter are not two separate, externally related spheres of existence, but aspects of one, internally related whole. The background within which we are all embedded is, we can say, a participatory reality, a reality within which we all are already involved, a reality of which we partake and to which we contribute. And what we do by our
use of such words as mind and matter, is to draw each other’s attention, not to clues indicative of its hidden workings behind appearances, but to the dynamic workings of the relationally-responsive, two-way processes of involvement, readily sensed as functioning in the dynamically unfolding relations between us and our surroundings. Our expressive use of words is simply a refinement of such unfolding processes as these.

Indeed, in this respect, when Wittgenstein (1953) notes that he has introduced the term “language-game... to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (no.23), it is to point out that often, words are an almost negligible part of what is occurring spontaneously and responsively between us. Hand wavings, arm wavings, finger pointings, head movings, snorts, intakes and outletttings of breath, stares, smiles, and so on and so on, are all a part of our intelligible relations with each other. “What, then, is the sign material of the psyche?” asks Voloshinov (1986). And he answers: “Any organic activity or process: breathing, blood circulation, movements of the body, articulation, inner speech, mimetic motions, reaction to external stimuli (e.g., light stimuli) and so forth. In short, anything and everything occurring within the organism can become the material of experience, since everything can acquire semiotic significance, can become expressive” (pp.28-29). It is in this sense that nothing is hidden. But to become aware of all the nuanced details relevant to our particular, practical communications with each other, all the orchestrated, intertwined complexity of our up close and personal relationships, in such a way that we can discourse about them, not only requires a special relational stance to our communicative activities, and a special set of exploratory efforts from with this stance, but also, a spacial style of writing – a style of writings that uses images and examples, to repeat, not as illustrative of a practice, but as constitutive for a practice”. We need images and examples that call new responses from us as the beginning of new language-games, new ways of talking about communication. This is what Voloshinov exhibits for us in his text.

Thus, instead of attempting to provide any new theories of the supposed mechanical and repetitive realities underlying our behavior, Voloshinov focuses on the amazing and almost infinitely complex nature of what previously has passed us by, unnoticed, in the background to our lives: the flow of spontaneously responsive, living, relational activity within which everything we do in our ordinary, everyday lives is embedded. The perspective he offers us ... no, the form of life he offers us form within which to grasp its nature, is very different from the essentially Cartesian form of life we have adopted and trained ourselves into in our intellectual inquiries in recent (modernistic) times. Primarily, he shifts our attention away from what is supposed to be radically hidden inside us somewhere, and toward what occurs out in the world between us, which is only hidden from us because we fail to attend to it. He also draws our attention to the fact that, as living beings, we cannot not be responsive to our surroundings, and thus always in one or another living relationship to them. He has shifted our whole stance, from that of disengaged, outside observers, to being interested, involved participants. Indeed, a whole galaxy of changes is involved – a shift into a world very different from the modern, ‘external’ world in which we have now lived for three hundred years or so. As we shift into a participatory world, a world which makes calls upon us to which, if we are to act as intelligible participants in it, we are answerable, then we cannot just make-up theories about its nature as we please.

As Wittgenstein (1980, I) remarks, following Goethe: “Don’t look for anything behind the phenomena; they themselves are the theory (Goethe)” (no.889). In other words, in our responses to events in our surroundings, we are always already going beyond the immediate situation, to respond to it not only in terms of its connections and relations to other aspects of its surroundings, but also in terms of its openings to what-is-yet-to-be-achieved within it. But we are not doing this in terms of any inner pictures or mental representations of our surroundings. The ‘theories’ in terms of which we act are embodied in the spontaneous responses constitutive of our practices. The evaluative stances we adopt and the judgments we make, are simply a participant part of our practical lives in relation to our surroundings. This is what is ignored in such projects as Saussure’s: the degree to which all that is fact for us in our human lives is in this way already theory. Or, to put it in other words, we are ignoring the degree to which, from within their embedding in the ceaseless flow of spontaneously responsive activity continuously flowing between us, our actions and expressions already exhibit conceptual meanings in the reactions they elicit. Thus, to impose a rational system externally upon them, is to ignore all the internal relations existing both within this flow of activity, as well as the relations between it and its surroundings. Seen in this light, in its actual use, language is only ever a minor part of the much more comprehensive flow of interactive activity between people living in spontaneously responsive contact with each other. In its ordinary uses in everyday life, it is never a self-contained linguistic system. It is always already in a living, interactive, constitutive, relation to its surroundings. It is this that Voloshinov brings to our attention. He leads us into an awareness of the practical, poetic {poiesis = making} world of our own making, a world in
which nothing is fixed or finalized, in which everything is a complex mixture of both orderly and disorderly tendencies, of objective and subjective characteristics, and in which we all interlinked in with each other in a precarious web of partly spontaneous and partly self-consciously chosen relations, relations which we create and sustain, elaborate and refine, from within our own living practices of them.

To act toward and within our social world in this way, is to act toward it as depending just as much, if not more, on the common and collective sense of ordinary people than on the abstract and systematized ideas of intellectuals. It is to value the already existing links and connections between us all, over the search for new ones. Indeed, it is to suggest that the character of what already exists between us is providential (see Shotter, 1993), in the sense that the traditions existing between us are never monolithic in their systematicity, but, in being dynamically unfolding, dialogically-structured, indivisible wholes, they always contain still as yet unrealized possibilities. Life within such living traditions, thus, consists in two tasks. Work here is not a simple matter of debate and argument over the implementation of one or another finalized system, but a continual articulation, the rendering explicit, of the implicit relations already in place between us is a necessary preliminary to any debate – which, in any case, can only ever be a moment in a continuous unfolding process of development. Hence, rather than in closed seminar rooms and academic conference halls, needs to go on in public squares. We need places in which to continue our conversational wanderings, places to which all have access, wanderings within which all can participate, civil conversations which are civil in both the sense of civility and in being inclusive of all.

References:


Notes:

1. “Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not in certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e, it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game” (Wittgenstein, 1969, no.204).

2. William James (1890), in his chapter on The Stream of Thought, gives a most vivid account of such a flow of spontaneous, relational activity: “The truth is that large tracts of human speech are nothing but signs of direction in thought, of which direction we have an acutely discriminative sense, though no definite sensorial image play a part in it whatsoever. Sensorial images are stable psychic facts; we can hold them still and look at them as long as we like. These bare images of logical movement, on the contrary, are psychic transitions, always on the wing, so to speak, and not to be glimpsed except in flight. Their function is to lead from one set of images to another. As they pass, we feel the waxing and the waning images in a way altogether peculiar and a way quite different from the way of their full presence. If we try to hold fast the feeling of direction, the full presence comes and the feeling of direction is lost” (pp.252-253).

3. There is no more quintessential statement of this aim than Descartes’s (1651/1968) account of the point of his “practical philosophy.” If we had it, he says, “we might put [the effects of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens and all the other bodies which surround us] to all the uses to which they are appropriate, and thereby make ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature” (p.78). To this we might add Kant’s (1781/1970) urgings that reason “must not allow itself to be kept, as it were, in nature’s lead-strings, but... [must function only as] an appointed judge who compels the witness to answer questions which he himself has formulated” (p.20), if reason is to follow the true path of science.
4. I place ‘part’ is scare quotes here, for, as we shall see, to talk of the ‘parts’ of a dynamic, living whole, which all exist only because they mutually determine and create each other from within the whole as it grows, is quite different from talking of the parts of a mechanical whole, which can all exist in themselves quite separate from the whole. Later, I shall talk of “internal participant parts,” in an attempt to draw attention to their lack of an independent existence.

5. As Searle (1983) remarks: “There is a real difficulty in finding ordinary language terms to describe the Background: one speaks vaguely of “practices,” “capacities,” and “stances” or one speaks suggestively but misleadingly of “assumptions” and “presuppositions.” These latter terms must be literally wrong, because they imply the appearance of representation... The fact that we have no natural vocabulary for discussing the phenomena in question and the fact that we lapse back into an Intentionalistic vocabulary ought to arouse our interest... There is simply no first-order vocabulary for the Background, because the Background is as invisible to Intentionality as the eye which sees in invisible to itself” (pp.156-157).

6. “All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system... The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life” (Wittgenstein, 1969, no.105).

7. External relation are to be contrasted, as we shall see, with internal relations, which constitute a wholistic, unitary context in which ‘parts’ owe their character to their relations to each other, i.e., each part in some sense is enfolded in all the others, thus, if the constitution of the unitary whole changes, then so does the character of all its parts.

8. Very like Voloshinov (1986) in this respect, as we shall see.

9. “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (Wittgenstein, 1953, no.115).

10. I am indebted to Capek (1961) for the material in the next paragraph.

11. While I will sometimes avoid the use of the vocabulary of the classical view at crucial points in the text, its avoidance altogether is impossible.

12. To talk of ‘positions’ is also an instance of classical concepts at work.

13. As Stapp (1993) notes, with respect to talk of particles in physics: “Our usual idea of a particle is as an abstraction from experience about macroscopic objects, and it normally carries, as part of the idea of localization, the idea that the localized entity is an independent entity, in the sense that it depends on other things in the universe only through various ‘dynamical’ effects. These dynamical effects are characterized by a certain respect for space-time separations. In particular they are ‘causal’. If the connections between particles radically transcend our idea of causal dynamical relationships, then the appropriateness of the word ‘particle’ can be questioned” (p.57).

14. “When philosophers use a word – “knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “is”, “proposition”, “name” – and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? – What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” Wittgenstein, 1953, no.116).

15. About the uselessness of pictures to us in understanding our mental activities, Wittgenstein (1981) remarks: “When one has the picture in view by itself it is suddenly dead, and it is as if something had been taken away from it, which had given it life before... it remains isolated, it does not point outside itself to a reality beyond” (no.236).

16. See Shetter, 1993, Ch.3 on Vico’s notion of “sensory topics.”

17. Rorty is nothing if not a black and white, either-or, thinker. To rid ourselves wholly of the classical vocabulary seems to me impossible, and, once we are aware of its influences on us and can at appropriate points choose a more suitable alternative vocabulary, unnecessary.

18. As an alternative to the words “see” and “seeing” in this sentence, we might use the phrases “respond to” and “responding to” – see also note 9 on the difficulty of replacing the classical vocabulary.

19. Indeed, later, we shall find that Voloshinov is appreciative of the approach of abstract objectivism, as he calls it.

20. The alternative is, as Wittgenstein (1981) noted, that “language is variously rooted; it has roots, not a single root” (no.656).

21. Again, I think, the connections here with Wittgenstein’s (1953) project of seeking to know one’s “way about,” (no.123). “Understanding,” says Wittgenstein (1980, I), “is like knowing how to go on, and so it is an ability: but I understand”, like ‘I can go on’, is an utterance, a signal” (no.875).

22. I emphasize the notion of “a presence” here because, as we move away from the idea that we can locate what we feel to be important about language in a single (hidden) center of organization, in “one comprehensive essence” (Wittgenstein, 1981, no.444), we must rethink the whole nature of humanly organized wholes. Rather than thinking that it is the discovery of a hidden system of rules, say, that is needed to join the infinite possibilities of language into a finite whole, another tack entirely is needed. We can come to a recognition of the workings of our language as a whole, “not by giving new information,” he notes (Wittgenstein, 1953), but by arranging what we have always known” (no.109). As we move around ‘inside’ such an arrangement of facts, as we move from fact to fact, a sense of a characteristic something begins to make itself felt, our actions can become informed from within by the unseen presence of a unified whole. It is this kind of grasp of language as a whole, from within, that Voloshinov seeks.

23. No wonder too, that Wittgenstein (1980) when faced with a similar realization of the vastly complicated, multifaceted, and multifariously connected circumstances... remarked that “when you are philosophizing you have to descend into primary chaos and feel at home there” (p.65).

24. Wittgenstein (1974) remarks about symbols that they “appear of their nature to be unsatisfied.” And he goes on to remark about a proposition, that it “seems set over against us as a judge and we feel answerable to it. – It seems to demand
that reality be compared with it” (no.85, p.132).

25. “Hegel walls history up again in the tomb of his system, but past philosophies keep on breathing and stirring within it -- along with them he shut up uneasiness, movement, and the working of contingency (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.127).

26. Here, Bakhtin’s influence on Voloshinov might have been crucial. Bakhtin (1993), in his very early writing, discussed how many forms of theoretical thinking, “establish a fundamental split between the content or sense of a given act/activity and the historical actuality of its being, the actual and once-occurrent experiencing of it. And it is in consequence of this that the given act loses its valuableness and the unity of its actual becoming and self-determination. This act is truly real (it participates in once-occurrent Being-as-event) only in its entirety. Only this whole act is alive, exists fully and inescapably - comes to be accomplished. It is an actual living participant in the ongoing event of Being: it is in communion with the unique unity of ongoing Being” (p.2). Later in this early text, he goes on to talk of “the undivided wholeness” of our performed acts. Indeed, as Bakhtin (1986) himself puts it, his writings are “unified by one theme in various stages of development. The unity of the emerging (developing) idea” (p.155).

27. Or elsewhere, Voloshinov (1986) remarks: "Any utterance, no matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication. But that continuous verbal communication is, in turn, itself only a moment in the continuous all-inclusive, generative process of a given social collective” (p.95).

28. See Shotter, 1984, 1993a and b, for a discussion of some of the strange properties of “joint action.”

29. “The relations between these concepts form a landscape which language presents us with in countless fragments; piecing them together is too hard for me. I can only make a very imperfect job of it” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p.78).

30. “All real and integral understanding is actively responsive, and constitutes nothing more than the initial preparatory stage of a response (in what ever form it may be actualized). And the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding. He does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his own idea in some else’s mind” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.69).

31. Elsewhere I have discussed this issue in terms of the differences between “with-ness” and “about-ness” writing (see Shotter, in press).