

# Negotiating Selves and Identities in Interaction: between Theory and Methodology

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This article takes as its focus the ways in which participants of an interaction, and in particular of a conversation, negotiate, modify and show different selves. Drawing from a dialogical perspective inspired by the works of Bakhtin, this article aims at exploring what it means to negotiate identity in conversation and underlines some methodological and theoretical challenges that researchers have to face within this field of analysis. In particular, the theoretical discussion will propose a perspective that conceive Self as a local, inter-subjective, polyhedral and polyphonic construction underlining its connection with studies on communication. In order to grasp the complexity of the study of self in interaction and to give an answer to the theoretical challenges outlined, the construct of positioning will be proposed. This second part will discuss how position could represent a theoretical and methodological concept that connects both lines of research and allows the study of the Self in conversation.

**Keywords:** Dialogical theory; Self in interaction; Discourse; Positioning.

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## Introduction

This article stems from two key assumptions shared by various contemporary lines of research: the first is that during the course of any interaction people produce and share meanings (Cronen, Johnson, Lannamann, 1982); the second is that symbolic tools mediate interactive and cognitive processes and that such tools construct, stabilize and define human experience (Vygotskij, 1934; Duranti, 2003; Mantovani, 2007). Starting from these premises it is possible to say that while engaged in any conversation people do many different things at the same time: define relationships, negotiate power, share meanings, pursue goals and so on. In so doing, people show different selves, evoke voices and negotiate identities. Adopting a theoretical framework which connects communication studies with dialogical perspective on self, this article aims at exploring what it means to negotiate identity in conversation and underlines some methodological and theoretical challenges that researchers have to face within this field of analysis.

## Studying Self in interaction

Within the field of social psychology the study of the self has been addressed from multiple perspectives, which from time to time have emphasized its different components. In general terms a first distinction can be made between those perspectives that conceive self as an internal structure of the mind of individuals and those that are mainly concerned with the study of self as a phenomenon «external» to the mind of the subjects (Mancini, 2010). The latter category, in particular,

emphasizes the relational and interactive nature of self, enhancing its character of fluidity. From this perspective Self is seen as something similar to what Aronsson (1998) calls identity-in-interaction: a local and inter-subjective construction, which is also polyhedral and polyphonic. Rather than from pre-existing semiotic resources, Self is something that emerges from relational process: individuality is created by and through others and the Other is part of the Self (Bakhtin, 1990; Mead, 1934). More precisely, Self is a local, social and cultural phenomenon which takes place through different, and often intermingling, aspects of Self /Other relation during the course of any dialogue (Bucholz & Hall, 2005). Moreover, the triadic interaction between Subject, Others and Object of discourse (Markova, 2006), that contributes to give form to that particular Self at that particular moment, echoes other familiar situations placed in different contexts and times (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, in press). In this sense, Self is polyhedral, since it is a unity made of many different connected triangles that refer to past experience. Self is not something completely new, but it derives from an integration and an elaboration of those past experiences in the here and now of the interaction in which people are involved. Finally, inasmuch as it is shaped through the intertwinement between internal and external dialogue (Grossen & Orvig Salazar, 2011; Salazar Orvig, 2005), Self is also polyphonic. From a dialogical standpoint, in fact, these two aspects of dialogue are always present and interconnected and refer, respectively, to the dialogue between our own voices and absent third parties' voices, and to the dialogue with real participants.

This perspective on Self faces a theoretical challenge. Focusing on the heterogeneity and processual aspects of the Self, the dialogical lens allows to observe aspects

usually ignored by the traditional perspectives that consider Self as a unitary construct inside the minds of individuals. On the other hand, in emphasizing the relational and fluid nature of the self, the dialogical lens risks to dissolve the individual within social processes (Stetsenko & Arievidtch, 2004). The attention on multiplicity and fluidity of Self should not be separated from the acknowledgement of its aspects of stability and unity. The challenge for this perspective is thus to account for subject's uniqueness without adopting an individualistic lens and to stress how a dynamic conception of the Self is the result of the interaction between stability and change (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, in press; Salgado & Goncalves, 2007).

### **Self and communication**

The idea of a local, intersubjective, polyhedral and polyphonic Self reserves a central role to communication, since dialogue becomes the process through which individuals negotiate relationships, meanings and identities.

But, what kind of perspective on communication should we adopt to study self in interaction?

First of all, it is important to take into account that the process of co-construction and the process of individual construction are recursive linked (Fruggeri, 2002). Through interaction, in fact, people co-construct realities and meanings that help define themselves as individuals, at the same time allowing them to interact with others. In communicative process the relational component feeds and it is in turn fed by the individual component. Dialogical perspective agrees with this position, which is well underlined by the concept of polysemy. This term refers to the capacity for a sign to have multiple meanings, so that every word is not pre-determined on the basis of a code, but it's actively constructed within a particular discursive action (Grossen, 2010). This means considering discourse as an inter-subjective achievement. Starting from its etymological sense, which means «discourse between», dialogue ontologically implies the presence of an Other with which to establish a productive relation of query (Strada, 1988). As Volosinov (1973, p. 86) pointed out «word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. Each and every word expresses the «one» in relation to the «other». [...] A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee».

The idea of Other to which dialogism refers to it's not simply referable to the Other-in-interaction, but it has been complexified and extended to include others from past interactions, general others linked to one's own social membership, and others as social objects.

Language, in the end, is characterized by an intrinsic otherness, since everything exists always in response to

what has been said before and is oriented towards a responsive understanding, that is, an understanding that actively anticipates the interlocutor's (even an absent or imaginary one) discourse (Bakhtin, 1981; Volosinov, 1986).

Returning to the question raised at the beginning of the paragraph, dialogical perspective on communication seems to fulfill the requirements for approaching the study of Self-in-interaction. The dialogical eye on interactive processes is, in fact, deeply embedded in this strong idea of the intertwinement between Ego and Alter, individual and social processes of construction of knowledge. Moreover it takes into account both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of interactions, and highlights the polyphony of language, that is the number of voices that populates the statements of the speakers.

### **Positioning: a useful theoretical and methodological tool**

The choice of the theoretical and methodological constructs that will help during the further steps of research should be coherent with the epistemological premises upon which the study itself is based. This paragraph will explain why positioning could be considered an interesting tool to grasp the complexity of the study of self in interaction and to give an answer to those theoretical challenges outlined before.

The interplay between self and communication, or, to be more precisely, between interactive communicative situations and the multiplicity of self expressions, is characteristic of the construct of positioning. This metaphorical term refers to the position that social actors occupy within conversations. It indicates both the way in which individuals are constrained by the available story-lines, jointly constructed with their interlocutors, and the active part that people play to locate themselves and the others within a particular discourse (Bamberg, 2005; Van Langenhove & Harre, 1994). Position is thus an attempt to account for the processual nature of identity, analyzing how different selves unfold within discursive contexts, which, for their nature, are also in constant motion. Regarding this, Harré and colleagues (2009, p.19) state that: « The realization that the content of positions is local and may even be momentary and ephemeral is the deep insight of positioning theory. As such, any positioning act can be challenged. [...] Change in positionings can change the meanings of the actions people are performing. [...] Changes in the meanings of actions can consequently modify, sometimes drastically, the story-lines that are taken to be unfolding in an encounter».

Although there is a common agreement on this general description, positioning is a quite complex theoretical construct. Above all because of the heterogeneity of the focalizations adopted by all the different Authors that dealt with this construct. In order to merge these various contributions into clear categories, it is possible

to distinguish at least three different perspectives on positioning. The first one is the approach of Rom Harré and colleagues (Harré & Davies, 1990; Harré et al., 2009). According to this line of research, particular attention is paid to the rights, duties and obligations that stems from certain social identities of people in interactions. The focus is on the way in which this set of norms orients and, sometimes, changes how people position themselves and the others within the conversation. A different perspective is that of Neill Korobov and Michael Bamberg (2007). These Authors consider how, in discursive practices, some linguistic and rhetorical devices are used not only to carry on the interaction, but also in order to promote or to undermine the social identities that emerge throughout the interaction itself. Finally, the third approach on positioning is that of Hubert Hermans (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), which uses the construct in close connection with his Theory of the Dialogical Self. According to this theory Self is «a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I positions in an imaginal landscape» (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992, p. 28). The focus, in this case, is primarily directed toward the internal process of the Self and the many I positions that it can take during each interaction with respect to the Other-in-the-Self and the internal public.

From a theoretical point of view, these different lines of research seem to refer to two main broad focus of analysis on positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Ragatt, 2007): one mainly concerned with its intra-personal features and the other one linked to its social aspects. However, the presence of this dichotomy allows the deepening of only one part at a time of this multifaceted object of study, without bringing out its dynamic characteristics connected to the intertwining between individual and social processes of construction. The potential of this theoretical construct, on the contrary, emerge only when it is considered in its complexity. The various internal I-positions, deepened through the studies of Hermans, are inextricably linked to the ways in which people position themselves and the others during the here-and-now of interaction. Moreover, these positionings have to do both with the internal Self, with previous experiences and with the social identities that are made relevant in that interactive space (Korobov, 2010). So, positioning is not only an expression of people's inner parts, but it is also a result of the social and interactive con-

text in which it has been expressed. The sense of unity of the Self, in fact, emerges also through the use of the same positions in different interactive moments situated in various spaces and times. Every positioning act is an invitation to take a particular perspective on themselves, others and the object of discourse: in this sense it is also a way to have an effect on the interlocutor. As Harré (2009) pointed out, in fact, any change in positioning can change the meanings of the actions people are performing. Such changes, in turn, can modify the narrative context within which they can place themselves.

In conclusion, the challenge for this construct is to retrieve its aspects of processuality, mutuality, recursivity and relationality, that also characterize the processes of negotiation and co-construction of self through dialogue. This redefinition of the theory, should be followed by an identification of some indicators that will help to trace the many facets of the construct during the analytic process.

This challenge embodies the double nature of this construct, which is at the same time theoretical a methodological. It is theoretical since the concept of position organizes the assumptions of the dialogical perspective on Self and, on the other hand, it is methodological because it could be used as a linguistic indicator of the multiplicity of Self in interaction.

## Conclusion

Starting from premises rooted in the cultural-historical psychology and in the dialogical perspective, this article tries to trace a path that connects different elements, from different research areas, that share the same theoretical assumptions. This imaginary line connecting the studies on the Self with the studies on communication tries to give a shape to an object of research that quite often appears fragmentary and confused.

The explicitation of those theoretical challenges that the study of the Self-in-interaction imposes, allows to reflect on the methodological and theoretical constructs that can expand our knowledge in this field of analysis. In this sense, positioning is consistent with the theoretical framework presented and, although its use requires further reflection, it seems to be a promising tool for the analysis of the negotiation of identities in conversation.

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## Примирия идентичности и «Я» в процессе общения: между теорией и методологией

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В статье рассматриваются способы, с помощью которых участники взаимодействия — в частности, разговор — примиряют, видоизменяют и проявляют различные «Я». Опираясь на диалогический подход, восходящий к работам Бахтина, автор ставит своей целью исследовать, как осуществляется примирение идентичностей в ходе беседы, особо подчеркивая методологические и теоретические задачи, встающие перед исследователями в рамках данного анализа. Так, в теоретической части статьи обосновывается представление о «Я» как о локальном, интерсубъективном, многогранном и полифоническом образовании и тем самым обозначается взаимосвязь данной работы с исследованиями коммуникации. Для того чтобы понять всю сложность изучения «Я» в процессе взаимодействия и дать ответ на обозначенные теоретические вопросы, автор предлагает ввести понятие позиции. Во второй части статьи обсуждается, каким образом позиция может послужить теоретической и методологической основой, объединяющей обе линии исследования и позволяющей изучать «Я» в процессе общения.

**Ключевые слова:** теория диалога, «Я» во взаимодействии, дискурс, позиционирование.