

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE BAKHTIN CIRCLE AND LANGUAGE

*It is impossible to achieve greatness in one's own time. Greatness always makes itself known only to descendents, for whom such a quality is always located in the past (it turns into a distanced image); it has become an object of memory and not a living object that one can see and touch.*

—Bakhtin (1981, p. 19)

Human history has shown that people who were interested in understanding human relations, its politics, its mechanisms of domination and subordination, and its social-ideological analysis, were condemned by the dominant ideology that is always affected when it is uncovered, denounced, and deconstructed. This is the history of many people who suffered persecution, imprisonment, exile, extermination, false assumptions of suicide, and so forth. This is, for instance, the history of Karl Marx, Paulo Freire, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, and of many groups, including the Bakhtin circle.

The Russian philosopher, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975), can be considered one of the most important intellectuals of our century. As history shows, Bakhtin suffered persecution and exile during the 1920s and 1930s because, through his studies of social theory, poetics, and philosophy, he was uncovering the ways in which people are manipulated by dominant ideologies. Despite the persecution at that time, when the Soviet Union was facing revolution and repression, Bakhtin and other

scholars were together composing a group whose major goal was the discussion of philosophy and politics. The group was comprised, on a regular basis, of Bakhtin; Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov (linguist and musicologist); Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev (literary theorist and editor of academic journals); and Lev Pumpianskij (philologist and professor of literature). However, there were many other scholars, including pianists, artistic directors, and archeologists who periodically attended the group discussions. Furthermore, it is supposed that works of intellectuals such as Lev Vygotsky were discussed among members of the Bakhtin circle since its members shared a myriad of theoretical assumptions addressed by Vygotsky—especially about social consciousness (Clark and Holquist, 1984).

I. R. Titunik, who is the translator of Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973) as well as *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* (1976), emphasizes the importance of the Bakhtin circle.

Recently, thanks to the current phenomenal renaissance of semiotics in the Soviet Union, new and intriguing information has come to light concerning a whole school of semioticians operating during the period of the late 1920s and early 1930s. M. M. Baxtin, whose masterworks on Dostoevskij and Rabelais have now achieved international acclaim, has been identified as the leader of this school and V. N. Voloshinov as his closest follower and collaborator. (1973, p. 6)

Titunik (1973) explains that during the 1920s and 1930s there was a group of scholars who were investigating the theory of language and literature in the field of semiology. The translator argues that this group not only had Mikhail Bakhtin as a leader but was also interested in a Marxian study of ideologies—which always represented a threat to any established political system. As a result of the pressures that stemmed from the political constraints at that time, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist (1984) inform us that

Bakhtin was arrested around January 7, 1929, on a number of charges. One charge, which was later dropped, was that of being a member of the Brotherhood of Saint Serafim. Another charge was that a list of members of a future anti-Communist Russian government, published in Paris, included his name. . . . Still another charge was that in his private lectures in the pastoral

courses around Leningrad Bakhtin had engaged in the Socratic crime of 'corrupting the young.' (p. 142)

In fact, there exists considerable information about Bakhtin (e.g. Clark and Holquist, 1984; Hirschkop, 1989), but very little information about his friends and the way in which the circle internally operated. What is known is that the principal members of the Bakhtin circle during the 1920s—Valentin Voloshinov, Pavel Medvedev, and Mikhail Bakhtin—shared certain assumptions: that social interaction constructs meanings and that language both represents and masks ideologies. But the general lack of information about the Bakhtin circle limits a broader understanding of the role played in the circle by Medvedev, for instance, or even by Voloshinov, who published books based on Marxian analysis. Some scholars presume that Voloshinov disappeared in the Stalinist purge during the 1930s (Ponzo, 1990). Other scholars believe that Voloshinov died in the beginning of the 1930s as a victim of tuberculosis without finishing his works and that Medvedev died in the beginning of the 1940s in a unknown place after he was arrested in 1938 (Clark and Holquist, 1984). Many scholars (e.g., Wehrle, 1978; Holquist, 1990; Walsh, 1991) believe that Bakhtin is the author of books and articles published under Voloshinov's and Medvedev's names. However, in every assumption about the disputed texts, there is no final answer to the ongoing debate about the authorship of these texts.

### VOLOSHINOV OR BAKHTIN? WHOSE AUTHORSHIP?

The question "Whose authorship?" was transformed into an extensive debate that attempted to clarify whether or not Valentin Voloshinov's books were written by Mikhail Bakhtin. On the one hand, there are advocates of Bakhtin as the only author despite the recognition that Voloshinov was interested in a semiotic analysis of Marxian views. On the other hand, there are advocates of Voloshinov's authorship. Among many scholars, these two groups of advocates have been strongly represented by I. R Titunik, who believes that Bakhtin is not the author under Voloshinov's name, and Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, who believe that the works published under Voloshinov's name are Bakhtin's complete authorship.

The group that is favorable to Bakhtin's authorship believes that because of the political and social pressure of the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union, among other reasons, Bakhtin published *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* under the authorship of Voloshinov. For instance, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist (1984) dedicated a whole chapter of their book to discuss this authorship issue.

Voloshinov's first wife flatly disavows her husband's authorship and claims that Bakhtin wrote the two books in question. . . . One objection raised to Bakhtin's authorship is the difficulty of writing four books [Medvedev and Voloshinov's books], each covering a different field, and several articles all during the brief period from 1926 to 1929. In reality, however, these works were merely published during that period and were actually written over a much longer period. . . . Most of the conditions of Bakhtin's life in the late 1920s were also conducive to productivity. He had no children and few job obligations. . . . Although Bakhtin was chronically ill, he had a remarkable intellectual energy, which lasted until the end of his life. Indeed, the explanation he gave to Yudina as to why he had published under his friends' names included the statement: 'We were friends. We would discuss things. But they had their jobs, while I had the time to write.' (pp. 148-149)

Furthermore, in their analysis of Bakhtin's work, Clark and Holquist (1984) emphasize the connection of Bakhtin to Marxism. They believe that, despite the general belief that Bakhtin was not a Marxian, Bakhtin used Marxian terminology and theoretical aspects such as the powerful ideologies of capitalism in Russia in many of his published works. In other words, Clark and Holquist believe that Bakhtin was always able to connect his own thoughts to Marxian political and social positions. However, these explanations and other explanations presented by Clark and Holquist do not seem sufficient to convince Titunik that this is proof of Bakhtin's authorship. Despite the intellectual bond with Voloshinov during the period of the Bakhtin circle's existence, Titunik does not believe that Bakhtin has written Voloshinov's published works.

In 1986, two years after the publication of Clark and Holquist's *Mikhail Bakhtin*, an open forum appears in the *Slavic and East European Journal* to discuss the relevance of Bakhtin's work. In this forum, the

authorship issue comes into play and Titunik, Clark, and Holquist went back to the extensive debate, in which the main point is the connection between Marxism and Bakhtin's theoretical reflections. However, despite the discussion among these scholars, it is incontestable within this forum that none of them has the final answer to the authorship debate. On the one hand, Titunik (1986) criticizes Clark and Holquist's assumptions because they simply connect the relationship between Bakhtin and Marxism on the basis of the use of Marxian terminology in publications under Bakhtin's name. In other words, Titunik does not believe that Marxian terminology in Bakhtin's work is a sufficient explanation to consider Bakhtin as a Marxian. Furthermore, Titunik (1986) argues that

[w]e are told that Voloshinov wrote a dissertation topic of which 'was probably the problem of how to present reported speech' (110). As the authors well know, a whole section (part 3) of Voloshinov's *Marxizm i filozofija jazyka* is devoted precisely to the problem of reported speech. Are the two items one and the same? Clark and Holquist inexplicably did not investigate. . . . The whole issue of the authorship and/or responsibility of/for the disputed texts is perplexing; it is a riddle which has not been solved . . . but nothing I have read in that book has persuaded me to alter the attitude of skepticism. . . . The circumstantial evidence for attribution of the disputed texts to Baxtin is formidable. But merely to assign everything to Baxtin and to consign Voloshinov and Medvedev to oblivion—the tack taken by the majority of interested parties including Clark and Holquist—is not only manifestly unfair but also does not eliminate the problem. (pp. 93–94)

This critique against Clark's and Holquist's assumptions addressed by Titunik is shared with Gary Saul Morson (1986), who argues that the authorship issue became a comparison of intellectual ability and intelligence among the Bakhtin circle members. Morson (1986) asserts that

Clark and Holquist also contend that the undisputed texts of Volosinov are of a lower quality, and the undisputed texts of Medvedev of a much lower quality than the undisputed texts of Baxtin, and, therefore that Volosinov, and especially Medvedev, were not intelligent enough to have written anything but the poorer passages of Marxism, Freudianism, and The Formal

Method. . . . One might also add that judgments about the quality of a work are notoriously subjective and unreliable. (p. 87)

On the other hand, Clark and Holquist (1986) argue that they did not assume a final position regarding the disputed texts. However, they respond to Titunik's analysis.

He [Titunik] asks if the portions of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* devoted to [reported speech] are not identical to Voloshinov's dissertation on the same topic, a question which 'Clark and Holquist inexplicably did not investigate.' That we cannot answer this question does not mean we did not investigate it. The fact is, Voloshinov did not finish the dissertation and no copy of his notes remains. . . . Another aspect of our book that troubles Titunik, and for which a definitive answer cannot be provided, is the account we give of Baxtin's relation to Marxism. . . . There is every reason to believe Baxtin was never a Marxian in any conventional sense of that word . . . but to say as much is not to deny that Marx may have been an important influence in Baxtin's development. Baxtin was in sympathy with Marxism's emphasis on collective over individual factors in society, and he was impressed by the notion of the ineluctability of historical struggle between those having power and those without it. (p. 98)

It is obvious that a final answer to the authorship debate does not exist. For this reason, I would like to clarify what my own position is in this debate. As we could read in the previous paragraphs of this brief section, there exists a lack of evidence to explain whether or not Bakhtin wrote the published works under Voloshinov's name. Regarding the authorship debate, I completely agree with Ken Hirschkop (1989a) who argues that

we have to confront what might seem to be rather a pedantic issue: how and by whom were the texts published under the names of Medvedev and Voloshinov written? This problem has had an ambiguous effect on Bakhtin scholarship. On the whole it has clearly been an obstacle to interesting work on Bakhtin and company, because it has licensed a shift of attention away from the theoretical and historical issues posed in the texts to questions about the lives and personal motivations of the

authors. But this question of attribution is made more interesting by the fact that it is so obviously a political question as well. The writings of Voloshinov and Medvedev attack the same problems with much the same weapons as the writings of Bakhtin, and each of these texts can be read as a gloss on the others. (p. 196)

Therefore, I will consider that Valentin Voloshinov is the author of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* as well as *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*. On the other hand, there exists evidence (e.g., Titunik, 1973, 1986; Wehrle, 1978; Clark and Holquist, 1984, 1986; Morson and Emerson, 1989) that Mikhail Bakhtin and Valentin Voloshinov belonged to the same group of scholars who studied the interconnections between language and society. For this reason, I will also consider Bakhtin's theory in the context of a broader understanding of the way in which the Bakhtin circle conceptualized language.

#### THE WORLD OF LANGUAGE THROUGH VOLOSHINOV'S AND BAKHTIN'S EYES

Voloshinov argues that the main aspect in the Marxian analysis of ideologies is the interrelationship between base and superstructure, that is, an analysis of what constitutes society in the light of human relations. In fact, the explanation of this interrelationship is completely connected to an understanding of the philosophy of language because it is the domain of ideology that has the possibility of changing social relations. It is through language, among many processes, that a material representation of culture and history of humankind as a social agent is established. For this reason, Voloshinov (1973) understands the philosophy of language as "the philosophy of the ideological sign" (p. 15). In this sense, language is conceptualized as a semiotic social entity that exists within the domain of ideologies. Furthermore, in order to explain psychological processes as social, Voloshinov (1973, 1976) articulates the relationship between sign and ideology, demonstrating that the analysis addressed by linguists and psychologists is merely focused on written systematization without looking at the social and ideological aspects of the sign.

*Sign*

Voloshinov (1973) argues that when a tool is created it has a specific function of production. However, a tool is not itself a sign but it can be converted into an ideological sign when 'treated'. For instance, there are different colors and many stars in the Brazilian flag: blue represents the sky, green represents the forests, white represents peace, yellow represents the gold and precious stones of the land, and each star represents one of the Brazilian states. Another example is that while we are driving, we know that we should stop when the light is red and we can move on when the light is green. Here, we are perceiving different signals (colors) that have become signs (ideological meaning). This means that anything can be an ideological sign that goes beyond the primary meaning. For this reason, Voloshinov (1973) argues that everything in an artistic-symbolic image is an ideological product converted into a sign. However, the existence of a social organization is necessary for the composition of an ideological sign. The ideological sign, thus, is a source of communication among people since the social material of signs is created by humans. There is no society without signs and a sign does not exist outside of society.

The ideological phenomena are connected to the conditions and forms of social communication, and signs are determined by this communication. In fact, a sign represents communication in a material form. When a sign is presented, ideology is presented, therefore, everything ideological contains semiotic value. This means that a sign is an embodiment of ideology. Ideology becomes a semiotic material in order to guarantee its own existence. According to Bakhtin (1981), our experiences are completely social and the ideological takes the form of a sign, which remains something that we can see or hear. Furthermore, every ideological sign is created within temporal and spatial structures that will never exist outside of social life. In this way, individual consciousness can only understand ideology and signs from the perspective of social interaction.

One of the major Voloshinov's arguments is that any word is an ideological phenomenon. The word has a function of a sign and, therefore, exists within social interaction. However, signs and symbols are created within a specific field and have specific ideological function, while the word can transport any kind of ideological function. For this reason, Voloshinov argues that a word is a neutral sign because a word can be used in any field, in a myriad of ideological functions. However, once a word is placed in a field, in a social context, it loses its neutrality, as Bakhtin (1981)

argues: “[A]ll words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (p. 293). Therefore, a word is not only the material of communication but is also permeated by a myriad of purposes, of social intentions.

For Voloshinov (1973), a word plays the role of “the semiotic material of inner life—of consciousness (inner speech)” (p. 14) because a word is created by humans without any kind of extra corporeal material. However, a word is the materialization of inner engagement. In this way, Voloshinov (1973) argues that “individual consciousness as the inner word (as an inner sign in general) becomes one of the most vital problems in philosophy of language” (p. 14). He also says a word is more than a social sign because a word is also a medium of consciousness. This means consciousness can be developed because a word is the necessary material that makes possible the existence of consciousness.

Because inner speech (the semiotic material of inner life—of consciousness) plays a crucial role in the process of understanding any kind of ideological phenomenon (painting, music, human behavior, etc.), even nonverbal signs cannot be disconnected from speech. This does not mean a word can replace an ideological sign but that each ideological sign is always supported and also accompanied by words. For instance, when we are driving in a car we see the color red and it means “stop.” Therefore, cultural signs in our social life become part of the verbally constituted aspect of consciousness because there is always the presence of word when we understand or interpret anything.

Voloshinov’s theory asserts the word is not only an ideological phenomenon but is also an index of social changes because the word registers the transition in each phase of social change, including its own participation in the production of ideological forms. Let’s analyze how this happens.

To begin with, the ideological sign is determined by an intersection of different social interests. Voloshinov (1973) says that “each and every word is ideological and each and every application of language involves ideological change” (p. 94). This means the ideological sign represents an arena of class struggle in society because diverse classes will use one specific language (English, for instance) but every ideological sign is fulfilled with different accents—accents that belong to people’s social locations. Bakhtin (1981) argues that accents represent a vital characteristic of stratification of language.

[T]hese languages [the language of the lawyer, the doctor, the businessman, the politician, the public education teacher and so forth] differ from each other not only in their vocabularies; they involve specific forms for manifesting intentions, forms for making conceptualization. . . . What is important to us here is the intentional dimensions, that is, the denotative and expressive dimension of the “shared” language’s stratification. It is in fact not the neutral linguistic components of language being stratified, but rather a situation in which the intentional possibilities of language are being expropriated: these possibilities are realized in specific directions, filled with specific content, they are made concrete, particular, and are permeated with concrete value judgments. (p. 289)

For this reason, Voloshinov remarks that any ideological accents are, in fact, social accents since it claims to social recognition. Consequently, the main aspect of the sign is its relevance within inter-groups relationships. In this sense, Bakhtin points out that the stratification of language is, in fact, social stratification, since the foreigners/outsideers who are not engaged in such professional jargons are excluded from the intentionality of these languages. Therefore, individual consciousness enters into a process to assimilate all of the social accents of ideological signs. This is what Voloshinov calls *multiaccentuality*, which emerges, basically, in social struggles. In other words, multiaccentuality represents an encounter of diverse social accents. Voloshinov’s idea of multiaccentuality within any language is described as *heteroglossia* in Bakhtin’s words. Bakhtin (1981) argues that

at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth. . . . Each of these ‘languages’ of heteroglossia requires a methodology very different from the others . . . all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. (pp. 291–292)

This multiaccentuality (or heteroglossia) is what makes an ideological sign not only something that is socially crucial but also something that is mutable within the social arena.

Beyond the multiaccentuality within any language, humans live in what Bakhtin calls a 'polyglot world'. The issue of a polyglot world is not a variety of existing languages but how a specific language exists in relation to other languages, how a specific dialect exists in relation to other dialects, and so forth. Bakhtin (1981) calls our attention to linguistic relationships in the world when he remarks that

one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language. . . . [T]hat is, there is no more peaceful co-existence between territorial dialects, social and professional dialects and jargons, literary language, generic languages within literary language, epochs in language and so forth. All this set into motion a process of active, mutual cause-and-effect and interillumination. . . . [E]ach given language—even if its linguistic composition (phonetics, vocabulary, morphology, etc.) were to remain absolutely unchanged—is, as it were, reborn, becoming qualitatively a different thing for the consciousness that creates it. (p. 12)

Bakhtin's main point in the above quotation concerns the location of consciousness and what makes language an accentuated system that establishes marks for this location. Therefore, it is relevant that we can understand the process of consciousness existence—human consciousness that exists as social resonance.

### *Consciousness*

Voloshinov believes the individual consciousness is constructed through social-ideological facts. He also argues that it is impossible for there to exist an objective definition of consciousness as well as an objective definition for unconsciousness. For Voloshinov, nobody can understand consciousness as an isolated form of thinking. He argues that "the only possible objective definition of consciousness is a sociological one. . . . The logic of consciousness is the logic of ideological communication, of the semiotic interaction of a social group" (1973, p. 13). This is the main critique Voloshinov addresses regarding Freud's analysis of consciousness and

unconsciousness. Voloshinov argues that, in fact, Freud analyzed what he called the unconscious level through the conscious level of his patients. In Voloshinov's words, "Freud's whole psychological construct is based fundamentally on human verbal utterances; it is nothing but a special kind of interpretation of utterances. All these utterances are, of course, constructed in the conscious sphere" (1976, p. 76). This means that if we are going to talk about our dreams or fears, for instance, we have to talk about them through verbal utterances that exist in conscious time. Therefore, any assumption about our dreams or our fears is already impregnated with our social consciousness.

Once we are talking to someone else, we consider our social relations, and from these relationships we choose a verbal expression that seems to be more adequate for the situation. In other words, every verbal utterance illustrates the limits imposed by social-ideological intercourse within our lives. Even when we try to explain what happened while we were in an "unconscious time," we express everything through the content of our consciousness. Therefore, as Voloshinov (1976) argues, "The Freudian unconscious does not fundamentally differ from consciousness; it is only another form of consciousness, only an ideologically different expression of it" (p. 85). I believe that even if an individual is hypnotized, a common practice to reach one's unconscious level, everything that is said during a hypnosis session comes out through verbal expressions and, therefore, social consciousness. Everything in what Freud calls "unconsciousness" has a verbal expression which is, in fact, the verbal expressions of dreams, desires, impulses, fears, feelings, and so on. Once it becomes a verbal expression, it is consciousness. Consequently, everything that composes this utterance (e.g., words, intonation) is a whole social entity.

Voloshinov argues that, in order to understand consciousness, it is important to consider the Marxian analysis of ideologies. That is, we have to consider the existing social-ideological systems such as religion, laws, morality, science, art, and so forth, in which humans are inserted. All of these systems are what construct both inner (inner life of consciousness) and outward (oral or written) speech, as well as any kind of perception or action we can have. Voloshinov (1976) states:

An experience of which an individual is conscious is already ideological and, therefore, from a scientific point of view, can in no way be a primary and irreducible datum; rather, it is an entity that has already undergone ideological processing of some spe-

cific kind. The haziest content of consciousness of the primitive savage and the most sophisticated cultural monument are only extreme links in the single chain of ideological creativity. . . . What is more, *my thought will be able to achieve final clarity only when I find exact verbal formulation for it. . . .* [H]uman consciousness operates through words—that medium which is the most sensitive and at the same time the most complicated refraction of the socioeconomic governance. [emphasis added] (p. 87)

Both ideological phenomena and individual consciousness exist only in relation to social organization and in the context of social interrelations. Since humans are social creatures, everything classified as psychological aspects are, in fact, social responses within human existence. Voloshinov (1976) argues that “there is no fundamental dividing line between the content of the individual psyche and formulated ideology” (p. 87). Therefore, there is no distinction between the psychological and social aspects of one’s life. To illustrate this analysis, Bakhtin (1981) writes about the effects of people’s words in our lives. The main point of his analysis is that we perceive ourselves through the lenses of other’s words.

[P]eople talk most of all about what others talk about—they transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgment on other people’s words, opinions, assertions, information; people are upset by others’ words, or agree with them, contest them, refer to them and so forth. Were we to eavesdrop on snatches of raw dialogue in the street, in a crowd, in lines, in a foyer and so forth, we would hear how often the words ‘he says,’ ‘people say,’ ‘he said . . .’ are repeated. . . . [These repetitions] reflect how enormous is the weight of ‘everyone says’ and ‘it is said’ in public opinion, public rumor, gossip slander and so forth. (p. 338)

Bakhtin remarks about the ways in which others’ words exert a powerful effect within our lives and the ways in which we give importance to understanding and interpreting others’ words. This engagement among people within a network of transmission represents a social conceptual system that shapes our social existence. Therefore, we cannot separate what is psychological from what is social, because what is considered psychological is equally a social response. However, there exists a misunderstanding regarding the differences between what is natural and what is social in

one's life. Voloshinov (1973) clarifies this distinction which, he says, has been misunderstood by psychologists and philosophers.

To avoid misunderstanding, a rigorous distinction must always be made between the concept of the individual as natural specimen without reference to the social world (i.e., the individual as object of the biologist's knowledge and study), and the concept of individuality, which has the status of an ideological-semiotic superstructure over the natural individual and which, therefore, is a social concept. (p. 34)

From Voloshinov's words we can perceive that consciousness exists only within the process of social interaction, which creates the ideological content. The ideological content is present in any word, in any utterance. It is around the concept of utterance that the whole idea of language as a vital social domain of ideologies is developed by the Bakhtin circle.

### *Utterance*

Since signs are social-ideological constructions and a word is a sign, Voloshinov argues that utterance can be only understood as a social phenomenon. That is, language is not an isolated phenomenon but a phenomenon that has its roots, creation, and existence within social relations. Furthermore, he argues that "[a]ny 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" (1973, p.95). An utterance exists within this generative process of any social collective because every utterance is not only part of a language but, as Bakhtin asserts, it is also part of a social and historical heteroglossia (multiaccentuality).

Any utterance has its *theme*, *meaning*, and *evaluative accent*. Voloshinov (1973) argues that "the theme [of an utterance] is the expression of the concrete, historical situation that engendered the utterance" (p. 99). This means that any utterance has different meanings and themes, depending on the situation in which it is used. However, meaning and theme coexist within an utterance and this means that one does not exist without the other. The *theme* is composed of aspects of the situation in

which an utterance is used. Nobody can understand the theme of an utterance if the moment (situation) is not taken into account.

Despite the impossibility of disconnecting what is meaning from what is theme in an utterance, Voloshinov (1973) argues that a theme is a concrete part of an utterance (such as the concrete moment in which an utterance is used), while meaning is what allows the accomplishment of a theme because meaning in an utterance is, in fact, a set of meanings altogether composing elements that are passive of reproduction in all instances of repetition. *Meaning* is what makes possible the existence of a theme because meaning is a composition of signs that are appropriate to the specific situation in which an utterance is used. Furthermore, beyond the fact that meaning makes possible the existence of the theme in an utterance, Voloshinov (1973) explains that "meaning belongs to a word according to its position between speakers. . . . *Meaning is the effect of interaction between speaker and listener*" [emphasis added] (p. 102). The social arena is what brings meaning to any utterance. Therefore, an utterance does not belong to someone but to this social arena where we are just social agents.

Beyond the presence of theme and meaning in any utterance, there exists also what Voloshinov calls *evaluative accent*. The evaluative accent in an utterance is the value judgment that permeates all words and all utterances. There is no one single word or utterance without evaluative accent, and this value judgment is permeated with social standpoints because the social arena is what will shape the way in which we evaluate everything.

Bakhtin (1981) writes that "the authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content as an individual utterance" (p. 272). It is worth noting that every utterance has its meaning and its value. However, changes in meanings mean changes in values or reevaluation. In other words, when a specific word is transported to another context there is a change of meaning, there is a change in the evaluative accent (value judgment). Bakhtin (1981) explains this process:

[A]ny concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist. . . . The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living

dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance. (p. 276)

Utterances do not exist outside of living interaction. Utterances are confronted with other utterances and the social arena is composed of a social background facing another social background. In other words, in society, an utterance does not express isolated linguistic aspects. Contrarily, an utterance expresses diverse social backgrounds accompanied by diverse value judgments. It is in the confrontation among social backgrounds that an utterance exists with its meaning and theme. Therefore, the relevance of theme and meaning and the way in which both theme and meaning operate in an utterance constitute crucial aspects of the process of understanding of one's life—a process that is, in essence, dialogic.

### *Process of Understanding*

Voloshinov explains that the process of *understanding* cannot be misunderstood for the process of *recognizing*. In order to highlight this distinction Voloshinov maintains that we can recognize the linguistic form, but to understand this linguistic form it must be placed in a context. This is the difference between 'signal' and 'sign' (e.g., the color green—a signal—which became a sign in the Brazilian flag). A signal has no relation to the ideological unless it is placed in a context, in which case it becomes a sign. For instance, Voloshinov (1973) argues that the 'understander' is not attached to a linguistic form just because this individual uses the same language as other people in the community. To the understander, every sign is changeable and the process of understanding is not a mere recognition of the same thing but "understanding in the proper sense of the word, that is, orientation in the particular, given context and in the particular, given situation—orientation in the dynamic process of becoming and not 'orientation' in some inert state" (p. 69).

The relevant aspect of Voloshinov's analysis is that the process of understanding never exists outside of human ideology and behavior. He explains that the process of understanding is, in fact, an engagement within our lived ideological and behavioral context. Our behavior exists within ideological systems (art, religion, laws, etc.) that, in turn have a powerful influence upon our verbal reactions. For Voloshinov, the lack of this interpretation constitutes the most critical oversight committed by the

advocates of abstract objectivism (Ferdinand de Saussure and his followers—whose theory I will discuss later in this chapter) because they do not recognize that a speaker's consciousness is a consciousness stemming from an ideological-social context in which each individual is inserted. There is no speaker's consciousness without social intercourse. Therefore, Voloshinov emphasizes that a system of language with immutable forms does not really exist, except in the abstract.

Bakhtin reinforces Voloshinov's analysis when he argues that an active understanding is a process in which a word is considered within a whole system of interrelationships. That is, a word is not understood in itself but in relation to a speaker's and listener's conceptual systems; that is, within a dialogic relationship in which understanding and response exist together. For this reason, Bakhtin (1981) argues that an utterance can be understood neither as a grammatical composition of words nor as a sentence out of context, and he clarifies the difference between *passive* and *active* understanding as follows:

A *passive understanding* of linguistic meaning is no understanding at all, it is only the abstract aspect of meaning. But even . . . an understanding of the speaker's intention insofar as that understanding remains purely passive, purely receptive, contributes nothing new to the word under consideration. . . . Thus an *active understanding* . . . establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enriches it with new elements. [emphasis added] (pp. 281–282)

The difference between passive and active understanding is that active understanding includes the conceptual systems of both speaker and hearer. The speaker leaves words in the conceptual territory of the hearer who brings a responsive understanding to the elements that have just been received. At the same time, the speaker knows that any elements directed to the listener are of a passive response even when this response cannot be orally verbalized. Therefore, the dialogic relationship between speaker and listener is not a mere classification of linguistic style but, as Bakhtin points out, an exchange of consciousness. Furthermore, Voloshinov always remarks that any kind of understanding is dialogic in nature, because the process of understanding requires active responses within a context. Understanding is a process that comprises word and counter-word. That is, the encounter of conceptual systems in any kind of communication.

### *Communication*

The main purpose of language is to facilitate social interaction because language establishes relationships among people. Voloshinov (1973) argues that verbal interaction is the primary reality of any language. In fact, language is a vehicle for the construction of ideology and, therefore, is the product of ideological conception.

When writing about verbal communication, Voloshinov is not simply arguing that verbal communication is the oral part of language or that it is written material. The main aspect of verbal intercourse is that it coexists with other kinds of communication. That is, verbal communication

is always accompanied with 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 auxiliary 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. (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 95)

This is to say that language must be perceived as a site of social-ideological existence in which the extraverbal context must be taken into account at the very moment of communication. Regarding the extraverbal context of an utterance and the primordial role of this context in communication, Voloshinov (1976) provides the following example:

Two people are sitting in a room. They are both silent. Then one of them says, 'Well!' The other does not respond. For us, as outsiders, this entire 'conversation' is utterly incomprehensible. . . . We lack the 'extraverbal context'. . . . At the time the colloquy took place, both interlocutors *looked up* at the window and *saw* that it had begun to snow . . . *both were sick and tired* of the protracted winter . . . and both were bitterly disappointed by the late snowfall. . . . And yet all this remains without verbal specification or articulation [author's emphasis] (p. 99)

As Voloshinov points out, even if we could analyze the word *well* in its morphological or phonetic characteristics, we could never understand the utterance just because we did not understand the contextual aspects in which this single word was applied. Only after understanding the contextual overview in which the conversation took place and the ways in which

both speakers/hearers were engaged, can we understand the meaning these speakers bring to the word well. In order for a responsive understanding to occur, the spoken "Well!" became more than a single word or an adverb followed by a punctuation mark. Therefore, an utterance exists within what is spoken and what is not spoken. This means that in any kind of communication, utterances exist in a context composed of space where the utterance is used; the speaker's understanding of a specific situation; and the speaker's evaluation of this situation. For this reason, Voloshinov (1973) is emphatic when he criticizes linguists because their attention (especially in the case of the representatives of abstract objectivism) has been directed to categories of language (e.g., morphological, syntactic) without considering utterance as a whole social entity. For instance, he argues that their definition of a sentence is implicit in an absurd assumption of monologic utterance. Furthermore, they consider morphological and syntactic categories of language as mutually exclusive when, in fact, these categories cannot exist. For Voloshinov, theme, meaning, and evaluative accent interexist in any utterance and utterances coexist with utterances. Therefore, an utterance cannot be considered within a monologic context.

Voloshinov (1973) argues that the main characteristic of communication resides in the phenomenon of the *reported speech*. He notes that reported speech is "speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time also speech about speech, utterance about utterance" (1973, p. 115). He also argues that it is impossible to disconnect *reported speech* from *reporting context*. Let's clarify his perspective.

What is important about reported speech is understanding the interconnection of reported speech and reporting context. The main issue is the way in which the reception of a reported utterance occurs. That is, the ways in which the reception of a speaker's speech exists in another speaker's speech. For instance, Voloshinov (1973) makes clear that one of the functions of society is a selection and adaptation of language factors in a grammatical structure exactly because the active and evaluative receptions are grounded within economic existence of individuals in a community. Receptions of any utterance are socially essential and continual. These receptions enter into an arena of mutable conflict because speakers of a particular community share diverse perspectives and, still, we socially live within this variety of tendencies. In other words, the main aspect of reported speech is its reception in speech itself—the social tendencies of reception in another speaker's speech. As I stated before, language does

not exist outside of social interrelations. In this sense, Bakhtin (1981) clarifies this process of reception.

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue. (p. 280)

Therefore, there are no boundaries between reported speech and reporting context. What occurs is a dynamic inner-speech reception where word meets word within an active understanding in which the discourse is enriched, modified, and challenged. This is what constitutes the meaning of dialogue—an encounter among utterances; an encounter of one speech with another speech.

It is obvious that the key aspect of all of these theories addressed by the Bakhtin circle is not only the way in which ideologies are created but the relationship between ideology and consciousness. In this way, language is a whole social entity that embodies ideologies within our social existence or, in other words, *language is the way in which ideology becomes concrete*. Communication is, in essence, a social activity and no meaning of a word can be understood outside of this social recognition. This is the main critique addressed by Voloshinov regarding the theoretical assumptions advocated by Ferdinand de Saussure. Voloshinov (1973) argues that when linguists attempt to analyze language and its structures, they often lose the social dimension, which is the primary reason for the existence of language.

#### A DEBATE BETWEEN VOLOSHINOV AND SAUSSURE: WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

As I stated in the introduction of this book, Voloshinov's and Bakhtin's theories represent a challenge to a structuralist/objectivist conception of language as addressed by Ferdinand de Saussure and echoed, at the present time, in the work of linguists such as Noam Chomsky—whose theories I will address in chapter 3 of this book. This dichotomy between these two groups of theorists lies in the sense that the first group—the Bakhtin circle—does not believe in linguistic analysis outside social relations, while