BOOK REVIEW

AIJMER, KARIN, ed., Dialogue analysis VIII: Understanding and misunderstanding in dialogue. Selected papers from the 8th IADA Conference, Göteborg, 2001. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2004. ISBN: 3-484-75027-8. 315 pp.

Reviewed by (Kanavillil Rajagopalan)

Dialogue is not simply a set of monologues considered collectively. Were it so, there would be no need to study the phenomenon independently. Anything interesting one might wish to say about it would quite simply be a carryover from what one may have already pointed out regarding monologue. However, the very fact that we name dialogue as worthy of special attention does betray something about the way linguistic theory has traditionally prioritized monologue, unceremoniously relegating dialogue to the margins. This is evident, for instance, as early as in Saussure’s famous discussion of the two ‘talking heads’. The message-encoding head does its job all by itself and is logically independent of its partner, the one whose job it is to decode that message. When, years later, Chomsky inaugurated his new paradigm, the central piece of his whole approach was an ideal speaker-listener, that is, the two vital components of a dialogic encounter mysteriously fused into one. What is simply being conveniently overlooked here is the idea that, if anything, it is monologue that is the abnormal behavior, not dialogue (Rajagopalan 2006). Or, as Per Linell puts it in his contribution to the volume of papers under the spotlight here: ‘Human communication has its primary habitat in interpersonal interaction’ (p. 7). The volume under review is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the topic of dialogue analysis.

The volume is made up of 20 papers, all originally presented at the 8th IADA (International Association for Dialogue Analysis) that took place in Göteborg, Germany in April 2001. They are grouped under 7 Sections (rather unconventionally called ‘chapters’). Chapter 1 is called ‘Dialogical grammar and spoken interaction’ and consists of two chapters. Chapter 2 comprises eight papers and is by far the biggest. This is followed by ‘Signposting in dialogue’, ‘Exploring dialogue in academic discourse’, ‘Dialogue and multilingual or multicultural schools’, ‘Focus group discussions’ and ‘Dialogue analysis and corpora’ (this last chapter comprising just one paper).

The opening chapter by Per Linell lays down a number of ‘dialogical principles’. These include sequentiality, co-construction and act-activity interdependence. The author also draws attention to the fact that a dialogical approach to grammar would focus on the spoken language of conversation or ‘talk-in-interaction’. ‘Well, not quite’, one might go on to add. If one takes into account Kristeva’s (1986) notion of ‘intertextuality’, then the dialogical nature of any text (be it spoken or written, or for that matter, simply imagined) will become immediately relevant.
The second chapter is by Amy Tsui. On the face of it, it has very little to do with the central theme of the volume. Rather, Tsui attempts to bring about a rapprochement between two contending paradigms, namely Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA). Once again, Tsui toils under the delusion that the dialogic principle or dialogism (Bakhtin 1981) is primarily a matter of spoken language. In consequence of her narrow view of what discourse is all about, she is content to see CA and CDA as simply two ways of looking at the same thing. Her essay is wrapped up with the triumphant (‘Can’t you see it for yourself, stupid’) conclusion: ‘The two approaches are […] complimentary and not competitive’ (p. 45).

The eight papers that make up ‘Chapter 2’ all address the issue of misunderstanding. Sorin Stati’s opening paper ‘Misunderstanding – a dialogic problem’ sets the overall tone. To call misunderstanding a dialogic a problem may mean either (a) that it is a deviation from the norm of what dialogic exchanges are or ought to be or (b) that it is a problem typical of dialogs. The two meanings often tend to get conflated. Together, they reinforce the guiding assumption behind many approaches to dialogue: misunderstanding is a departure from an ideal which is, alas, seldom if ever achieved in practice. Says Stati: ‘If misunderstanding is so frequent this is because a text could never be completely explicit: a certain amount of information remains hidden among the semantic markers and has to be detected and discovered by the recipient’ (p. 51). In other words, misunderstanding occurs because – alas! – there is the ever present fatal slip between the intentional cup and the interpretative lip.

In her chapter ‘Infelicitous communication or degrees of misunderstanding?’, Anita Fetzer considers the possibility that the concept of understanding (and hence misunderstanding as well) may turn out to be scalar rather than binary. This is clearly a step in the right direction. So too is Andreas H. Jucker and Sara W. Smith’s idea that the mental images used by participants in a conversation may in fact be vague and fuzzy, thus paving the way for all manner of disconnect and also making it possible, if need be, to fine-tune those images and achieve greater clarity or precision. This also opens the possibility that misunderstanding may not necessarily result from the interlocutor failing to capture the speaker’s message in its entirety – for the simple reason that that message may itself turn out to be partial or ‘defective’ in its very formulation. Here is what the authors have to say:

Speakers use a large number of referring expressions that turn out to be vague, potentially ambiguous or even mistaken if they are scrutinized on the basis of the conversational protocols and with the analyst’s intimate knowledge of the movie [as it happens, the topic of the conversation] that they are talking about. Speakers use referring expressions that are ‘mistaken’, either because they do not remember the film adequately (memory problems) or because they do not use the right words (linguistic problems). (p. 154)

The three papers included under the rubric ‘Exploring dialogue in academic discourse’ address a little-researched issue: how dialogic exchanges are constructed and structured in everyday interactions between academics in informal settings.

The last chapter by Edda Weigand entitled ‘Possibilities and limitations of corpus linguistics’ is timely and opportune. The author raises important questions concerning the self-sufficiency of corpus-based studies. One can only trust the text to the extent one does not raise doubts concerning the author/speaker’s sincerity. Here’s the point in the author’s own words:
At least, if you do not doubt the interlocutor’s sincerity, you can trust the text. The expressions used are all verbal expressions. The meanings they carry are contained in the expressions, at least, we suppose so. Not all action games, however, are as simple as [this]. The question arises: Can the corpus be our object-of-study, can we identify language-in-use, language as dialogue with the corpus? (p. 301)

Researchers engaged in delving into the workings of dialogue and who rely entirely on data culled from textual corpora may do well to mull over such matters before attempting to formulate theories based on such data.

KANAVILLIL RAJAGOPALAN

Department of Linguistics

Institute of Language Studies, State University at Campinas (UNICAMP)

Campinas, S. P.
13081-970 Brazil

rajan@iel.unicamp.br

© 2016, Kanavillil Rajagopalan

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00437956.2016.1141942

REFERENCES

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. In Michael Holquist (ed.), The dialogic imagination: Four essays. Tr. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 1986. Word, dialogue, and the novel. In T. Moi (ed.), The Kristeva reader, 35–61. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rajagopalan, Kanavillil. 2006. Social aspects of pragmatics. In K. Brown (ed.), Encyclopedia of language and linguistics. 2nd edn. Vol. 11, 434–440. Oxford: Elsevier.