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978-0-521-49941-5 - Mutualities in Dialogue

Edited by Ivana Markova, Carl F. Graumann and Klaus Foppa

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Dialogue has developed from more primitive forms of social communication in the course of evolution. In *Mutualities in dialogue*, 'dialogue' refers to face-to-face interaction between two or more individuals using a system of signs (both verbal and nonverbal). The contributors, distinguished scholars in disciplines from primatology to social psychology to linguistics and communication studies, all address the question: what is it that we share in the course of a dialogue? They argue that culture, mutualities of language, and some interpersonal knowledge are prerequisites for effective communication. Even in instances of non-cooperation or of asymmetrical dialogue – such as attempts to persuade, manipulate or blame – elementary commonalities must be present.

Mutualities in dialogue focuses on the dyad rather than on the interacting individuals, and is influenced by approaches such as dialogism, the phenomenology of perspective-setting and perspective-taking, interactionism and exchange theory. An introduction outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the volume and is followed by chapters on mutualities in preverbal and nonverbal communication, establishing and maintaining mutuality, problems of mutuality and understanding, and dialogues with speech-impaired partners.

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Preface

The study of communication has become, for scholars, practitioners and engineers alike, one of the most fascinating topics of exploration in the twentieth century. After almost a century the field is still growing, expanding and subdividing into new sub-fields. A sub-field of considerable interest today is the study of *dialogue*. While the focus on dialogue as a method of instruction and of inquiry goes back to ancient Greek philosophy, today the structure and process of dialogue attracts the attention of scholars and researchers in communication research, psychology, linguistics, literary criticism, and philosophy – to mention but a few scholarly disciplines. The study of dialogue is also of interest to practitioners, for example, language and speech therapists, counselors and practising psychologists.

Dialogue has developed in the course of evolution from more primitive forms of social communication. It refers, in the present volume, to a face-to-face interaction between two or more individuals using a system of signs. Notwithstanding the multitude of definitions, ‘to communicate’ (and therefore to engage in dialogue) means, not only etymologically but also factually, to share something with someone else or to impart something to someone so that it becomes the common property of all those participating in the dialogue. It is this core meaning of the verb ‘to communicate’ that has given rise to the present editors’ question: what exactly is it that we share in the course of a dialogue?

The standard answer to this question is that it is *information* that we share. Yet, such an answer is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. First, the term ‘information’ is either poorly defined or is assumed to be well understood by all those concerned. Second, information-based approaches rarely address such questions as: whether we share anything at all before we begin a dialogue; whether or not we enter a dialogue to discover if we share anything with our interactants;

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whether any kind of functional commonality presupposes a mutual sharing; and whether mutuality of knowledge and of trust are the *sine qua non* of a meaningful dialogue. These are the questions that are of central importance to the authors of the present volume.

In a sense, these questions also underlie those examined in the previous two volumes, *The dynamics of dialogue* (ed. Marková and Foppa, 1990) and *Asymmetries in dialogue* (ed. Marková and Foppa, 1991). However, while the previous two volumes *assumed* mutualities, the present volume is exclusively concerned with how these mutualities express themselves in dialogue. For example, the authors contributing to *Asymmetries in dialogue* presupposed that both dialogical asymmetries and symmetries *are mutually* constructed, maintained and reconstructed by the interactants. However, while this presupposition is perhaps relatively unproblematic for most readers with respect to dialogical symmetries, a comment may be required in the case of asymmetries. Asymmetries often arise from the attempt of one speaker to impose his or her own perspective upon the other interactant. For example, in order to manipulate, to express dominance and power, to persuade, and to blame the other, one interactant tries to thrust his or her point of view on the other person rather than to establish a joint perspective or to negotiate. Moreover, interactants may be non-cooperative or in a state of dialogical conflict, actively obstructing the establishment of intersubjective understanding. Their interaction may intensify dialogical asymmetries and may even lead to a breakdown in communication. However, even if interactants use non-cooperative strategies and try to manipulate each other, they must at least have something in common in a very basic sense. Such basic common prerequisites for communication include the very language they both speak, the culture in which they both live and at least a very elementary assumption about the other interactant (Graumann, chapter 1). Without such elementary commonalities, techniques of persuasion, of non-cooperation and of manipulation could not be used to any effect. It is in this sense that the term 'mutualities' is more basic than those of 'asymmetries', 'persuasion' 'non-cooperation' and so on.

In drawing attention to dialogical mutualities one is adopting a particular perspective on the study of dialogue. It is a perspective which focuses on the interacting *dyad* rather than on two interacting *individuals*. This particular perspective stems from a variety of approaches, such as dialogism, the phenomenology of perspective-setting

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and perspective-taking, interactionism, exchange theories and others. Yet within this broadly based perspective, even the notions of a 'dyad' and of 'interaction within a dyad' are based on different conceptions of mutualities and on diverse manifestations of intersubjectivity in dialogues. An awareness of such pluralities is reflected in the title *Mutualities in dialogue*. In his conceptual introduction Graumann (chapter 1) reviews the vocabulary of ordinary language and the terminology of the social sciences with respect to the usage of terms belonging to the family of commonality, mutuality and reciprocity. The author suggests some possible distinctions between these terms and he draws attention to the fluidity of boundaries, even in the social sciences, with respect to these terms. He argues that *reciprocity*, as a moral principle, refers to interdependent and intersubjective dialogical activities. Reciprocity, so conceived, presupposes a mutuality of knowledge and of trust and this, in turn, requires certain basic commonalities on which knowledge and trust can be built.

The first set of chapters comprising part 1 of the present volume deals with mutualities in preverbal and in nonverbal communication. In chapter 2 Ploog, a primatologist, presents evidence for 'Mutuality and dialogue in nonhuman primate communication'. Illustrating his account with cases of nonvocal mutuality in approach-avoidance and display behaviour in nonhuman primates, the author presents data which he analyses by means of a specific category system. The data show that the *kind* of vocal expressions emitted by one animal influences the vocalizations of the other animal, and vice versa. This mutuality of affection by specific (vocal) utterances is taken as a defining of the dialogical character of this type of primate communication. A discussion of the issues of intentionality and of deception in animal communication prepares the ground for a discussion of dialogical issues specific to human communication. In chapter 3, Papoušek discusses studies concerned with the 'Origins of reciprocity and mutuality in prelinguistic parent–infant "dialogues"'. Starting from the well-established fact of 'behavioural synchrony' between parents and infants, the author is able to show, with the help of behavioural microanalyses, how parent and child succeed in establishing reciprocity and mutuality in preverbal vocal interchanges. Despite a considerable asymmetry due to an initial lack of 'common ground', parent and child set up a common time frame, a common vocal code, a shared understanding of feelings and intentions and a shared topic.

Part 1 of the volume is rounded off by the chapter by Wallbott on

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'Congruence, contagion, and motor mimicry'. The title of Wallbott's chapter indicates that the author is concerned with particular issues dealing with the 'exchange' aspect of nonverbal communication. He also draws attention to related approaches, such as cognitive empathy, interactional synchrony and accommodation theory. The author concludes that since our understanding of these processes is still 'somewhat fragmented', an integrative view of the phenomena that may contribute to dialogical mutuality in nonverbal exchange has to await future research.

The two chapters in part II have in common a closer examination of the activities and processes that establish and maintain mutuality in dialogues. One contribution uses the perspective and the tools of conversation analysis and the other uses the point of view and the methods of experimental social psychology. Another commonality of these two studies is the belief that conversation is 'by its very nature a cooperative endeavour' (Gumperz, chapter 5); hence, it requires coordination. Both chapters deal with the specifics of coordination in a dialogical cooperation. In chapter 5, Gumperz investigates 'Mutual inferencing in conversation' by means of three case studies. The central assumption of this study is that common ground is established by on-line inferential processes. These depend on background knowledge (presuppositions and expectations) which is retrieved by means of contextualization cues. If contextualization cues are not common, due to unequal learning opportunities, interlocutors with a poor communicative competence will miss the frame of reference and, hence, will tend to misunderstand what is being said.

In chapter 6, on the 'Coordination of perspective in dialogue', Krauss, Fussell and Chen review several of their studies dealing with intrapersonal and interpersonal processes of perspective-taking. By '*intrapersonal* perspective-taking' the authors mean all those mental processes involved in the construction of a model of the partner or of the partner's knowledge. The term '*interpersonal*' refers, in this context, to any perceived feedback signs that help one interactant to adapt his or her message to the other interactant's perspective. The authors present evidence that both *intra*- and *interpersonal* perspective-taking 'work in tandem'.

The two chapters in part III can be subsumed under the heading of 'problems of mutuality' or, more generally, 'problems of understanding'. In chapter 7, Foppa raises and discusses three questions singling out different aspects of the problem of understanding in

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dialogue. Under the heading ‘On mutual understanding and agreement in dialogues’ he asks? first, ‘are there any unequivocal signs or symptoms that may be taken as proofs of understanding?’; secondly, ‘can we ever be sure about the level of mutual understanding?’; and thirdly, ‘what is the relationship between understanding and agreement?’ The author tends to answer the first two questions negatively, particularly, if understanding is qualified by the adjective ‘exact’. It may be comforting to note, though, that in most (non-technical) dialogues exactness is not an important criterion of understanding. Rather, the criterion of understanding is the interactants’ satisfaction that their mutual understanding is sufficient, i.e. ‘for all practical purposes’. The answer to the third question is comparatively easy. Understanding and agreement are not mutually contingent. We may agree as well as disagree without having understood each other. Understanding does not imply agreement. None of these processes is necessarily mutual.

Although Linell (chapter 8) draws attention to ‘Troubles with mutualities’, his contribution carries the promising subtitle ‘Towards a dialogical theory of misunderstanding and miscommunication’. Considering that understanding is never complete but is always open to further elaboration, the author maintains that ‘understanding and misunderstanding cohabit in discourse and interaction’. In other words, if understanding is a matter of degree, it is always partial and fragmentary. Therefore, the analyst of dialogue must pay as much attention to the acts and processes that result in misunderstanding as to those generating understanding. Using data from dialogue-interpreted conversations with Russian-speaking foreigners, Linell demonstrates how miscommunications in such dialogues are both socio-culturally embedded and collectively generated.

While part III addresses general problems of and with mutuality, part IV focuses on mutuality in special cases of dialogue involving interactants with language- and speech-impairments. In her study of ‘Mother–child dialogues’ (chapter 9), Grimm compares dialogues between mothers and children with normal speech with dialogues in which mothers converse with children who have specific language impairment. Without displaying any cognitive or other kind of disorder, such children acquire language considerably later than other children. The comparative study shows that mothers of children with specific language impairment very sensitively adapt their speech styles to those of their children. Yet they concentrate rather too closely on

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their children's linguistic disabilities and, hence, they tend to ignore their children's cognitive abilities and communicative competences. The obvious constraint on mutuality originates here in an inadequate conception of the dialogical partner.

Chapter 10 by Collins and Marková focuses on 'Complementarity in the construction of a problematic utterance in conversation'. This comprises a case study involving a person with cerebral palsy and her speech and language therapist. On the basis of a transcribed conversation between these two interactants the authors show, in microgenetic detail, how each step in this dialogue is jointly constructed through a sequence of questions and answers, of trials and repairs. The complementary functions of the various kinds of dialogical mutuality are highlighted. This study, as well as the previous one, illustrates how conversations involving speakers with impaired language or speech can make significant contributions to a general theory of conversation and dialogue.

In a brief concluding chapter, written in the form of an epilogue, Farr and Rommetveit highlight, summarize and integrate some of the major themes raised in the various investigations of mutualities in dialogue. Specifically, with reference to Darwin's work on the expression of emotions, the authors discuss the nature of the communicative act. They argue that it is the jointly constructed communicative act rather than the actions of individual interactants that should be the unit of analysis in the study of dialogue.

When two of the present editors, Carl F. Graumann and Klaus Foppa, convened a symposium on mutuality in dialogue in 1988 at the International Congress of Psychology in Sydney, two issues became evident. First, that in order to understand the mutualities involved in dialogues, more should be known about the dynamics of dialogue. Secondly, that any effort to attain a better understanding of these dynamics must be interdisciplinary.

The editors are extremely grateful to the Werner Reimers Foundation for their most generous support, during the period 1988–1993, of our study group on 'The dynamics of dialogue.' The chapters presented in this volume are the outcome of this study group and of workshops that involved other authors contributing to this volume. We also wish to express our gratitude to the late Mr Colin Wright who gave his generous help in the early stages of the preparation of this volume. Finally, we are very grateful to Susanne Kemmer, who provided invaluable help with the index, and to Miss Michelle Lee of

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