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Dialogue and dialogic perspectives on actions, interactions and practices across contexts



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ABSTRACT

The overarching goal of this special issue is twofold: first, to show how context-driven dialogue practices are envisaged and enacted in public and private settings, as part of interpersonal or institutional communication patterns, embedded in specific social-cultural traditions; second, to demonstrate that dialogic interaction can best be examined and understood through an analytical interplay between pragmatics and complementary fields of inquiry. While ample evidence indicates that dialogue is a pervasive form of human communication, action and interaction which cuts across our everyday societal endeavours, there are also instantiations of dialogue that can display underlying misrepresentations and misunderstandings that may overturn the smooth unfolding of human communication. To address such challenges, this special issue brings together a selection of articles that make use of pragmatics-related multi-disciplinary perspectives to critically explore relevant aspects of dialogue both off- and online, in terms of personal and institutional position-takings, collaborative and confrontational discourse practices, or affiliation and disaffiliation in actual disputes.

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1. Dialogue in a philosophical perspective

The study of dialogue is directly related to the study of interpersonal, intergroup and intercultural communication where dialogue is a basic form of socialization for human beings, serving as a characteristic tool for building relationships, sharing ideas and feelings, or exchanging views (Carbaugh, 2013). It is through dialogue that individuals interact within various areas of activity and at various levels of society. To capture the context-driven, situation-based and culture-specific impact of dialogic communication patterns, it is essential to examine in situ instantiations of dialogue as social interaction practice, as jointly steered activity, as philosophical or scientific method of inquiry, as rhetorical process of co-reflection, as pedagogical strategy, as problem-solving tool, as mechanism of ethical and political scrutiny. Theoretical and empirical studies explore dialogues in various forms of verbal communication: oral and written, private and public, multi-level (between two or several interlocutors, with or without an overhearing audience), synchronous and asynchronous (e.g. face-to-face vs. computer-mediated). The articles that make up this special issue use pragmatics-based multidisciplinary perspectives to analyse critical elements of dialogic or dialogue-oriented discourse genres displayed both off- and online, in terms of personal or institutional positioning, collaborative or confrontational discourse practices, or affiliation/disaffiliation moves in interpersonal interactions.

The study of dialogue as an ubiquitous form of human communication, action and interaction is historically rooted in the ancient Greek polis (i.e. city-state), where citizens were engaging in open dialogue as an interactive strategy of jointly thinking and searching for knowledge and truth. Dialogue has played a crucial role in philosophy, starting from the oral dialogues of Socrates, through the written dialogues of Plato (2010) and Cicero (2001), to the currently multifarious dialogues

in cyberspace (Bohman, 2004; Wade and Fauske, 2004). For example, Plato's dialogues, the very first written dialogical accounts in human history, are regarded as a replication of oral communication in times of heated debates about the transition from oral to written communication (Dafermos, 2013). For Cicero, the dialogue serves to enact a confrontation of competing philosophical positions, while at the same time, it shares an intrinsic pedagogical function with the philosophical practices of the Hellenistic Academy (Brittain and Osorio, 2021).

Philosophers have been particularly interested in reevaluating the notion, paradigms and impact of dialogue. Buber (1970/1937) views dialogue as a form of meeting of individuals with an orientation toward connection and relationship. In an attempt to overcome the idea of a dialogue as a mere exchange of opinions and information, Heidegger (1971) starts his approach to dialogue by asking questions. Following in the footsteps of philosophers like Plato, Gadamer (1983) regards dialogue as the basis of knowledge, enabling individuals to actively learn and train. For him, to understand something is to reach an understanding with another about it, which can only be achieved through a dialogue that sustains the interplay of questions and answers.

2. The dialogical turn

The constantly expanding *dialogical turn* (Camic and Joas, 2004; Escobar, 2009; Phillips, 2011) is following the extensively discussed 'linguistic turn' (Rorty 1967) in the '60s and '70s, when language was increasingly regarded as having a decisive role in comprehending reality and acquiring knowledge. The dialogical turn succeeds in foregrounding language use as prototypically dialogical since it involves acting, inter-acting, re-acting and counter-acting.

Modern approaches to dialogue cross the boundaries of traditional disciplines, and dialogue is increasingly viewed as a tool of theoretical and empirical inquiry in a wide range of intersecting disciplines, such as philosophy (Bahktin, 1986; Buber 1970/1937; Hegel, 2018/1807; Heidegger 1971; Wittgenstein, 2009/1953), psycholinguistics (Grossen and Salazar Orvig, 2011), social/cognitive psychology and communication studies (Linell, 1998; Marková and Foppa, 1990; Marková, 2003), political dialogue studies (Berlin and Fetzer, 2012; Bolívar, 2018; Ilie, 2015, 2021; Starbæk et al., 2016; Tannen, 1998; Truan, 2021), educational dialogue studies (Arvaja and Hämäläinen, 2021; Van der Linden and Renshaw, 2004; Wegerif, 2019), dialogue therapy studies (Georgaca, 2012; Martínez et al., 2012), and drama dialogue studies (Burton, 1980; Herman, 1995). At the same time, by means of dialogue it is possible to detect and assess underlying misrepresentations and misunderstandings that may overturn the smooth unfolding of casual conversations, family gatherings, public debates, political negotiations, and online discussions (Angenot, 2008; Koczanowicz, 2015; Nauman, 2003; Reilly, 1987). A major impact of the dialogical turn resides in growing awareness that language can no longer be regarded as a mere instrument in social practice, but rather as its prerequisite, and thereby as a premise for co-creating meaning at the interface of shared views, values and visions. Thereby the dialogical turn is paving the way for the expanding field of dialogue analysis, by integrating *dialogism* and *dialogicality*.

3. Dialogism and dialogicality

The term *dialogism* is most commonly used to denote the quality of an instance of human interaction that explicitly acknowledges that it is defined by its relationship to other instances, both past, to which it responds, and future, whose response it anticipates. As a philosopher of language and a literary critic, Bakhtin (1981) provides a wide-ranging scope to the conceptualization of dialogue, whose focus moves from dialogue itself to a dialogical view of human practice. A major connection between his dialogical view and the dialogical perspectives adopted in the contributions to this virtual special issue consists in moving away from an approach centered on the language-user towards the investigation of speech genres and world views that are ultimately responsible for interactively co-constituting each other.

Dialogicality focuses on understanding phenomena in their complexity and multiplicity, whether these are involved in language, communication, subjectivity or in social representations. In this respect, psycholinguists Grossen and Salazar Orvig (2011) argue that the dialogism of discourse provides us with clues about the dialogicality of the mind, whereas the latter invites us to develop a theory showing the importance of interactions in the construction of the self, to pay more attention to the transpersonal dimension of the social, and to consider that the material world contributes to the construction of the self. Linell (2009) advocated *dialogicality* as the actual instantiation of dialogue. According to him, we cannot talk about 'a' dialogical perspective, but rather about many different ways of doing dialogical research. For Linell (2017), there is a basic distinction between *dialogue* – in the sense of overt exchanges of sequentialised utterances or contributions by two or more participants who are co-present in particular situated encounters – and *dialogicality*, which is understood as a more general capacity that enables individuals or constellations of individuals to make sense in and through interactions with others, artefacts and environments.

Psychologist Marková's (2016) dialogical perspective presupposes that the nature of the Self-Other interdependence is ethical and that ethics is embedded in common sense making and socially shared knowledge. Psycholinguists Salazar Orvig and Grossen (2008) used a dialogical approach to examine the dynamics of clinical interviews viewed as a construction of a polyphonic space which is constituted through an intertwining of the voices of absent enunciators who are convoked by the patient and the therapist in their interactions.

4. Pragmatics of dialogue

The emergence of the pragmatics of dialogue has been triggered by insightful contributions made primarily by philosophers of language (Dascal, 1985; Grice, 1975; Searle, 1992), while its development was fostered by pragma-linguists (Bazzanella, 2002; Ilie, 2015, 2021; Macagno and Bigi, 2017; Stati, 1982, 1990; Tannen, 1998; Truan, 2021; Wierzbicka, 2006). A major theoretical value of the approaches to dialogue generated by philosophers of language consists in highlighting the interpersonal dynamics and action-oriented performance as prerequisites of speech act-articulated dialogic interactions. Dascal's substantial contribution consists in consolidating both the theory and the meta-theory of the pragmatic model of dialogue. According to him, the cognitive processes of truth-finding are frequently built in a dialogical way, which explains why he devoted a special study to the distinction between *debate*, *dispute*, and *controversy* (Dascal, 1998).

While incorporating the analytical toolkit provided by philosophers of language (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), including speech act theory, pragmatists turned against explanations of dialogue in terms of autonomous single speech act (Searle, 1992). Instead they argue in favour of an interdependence of multifunctional speech acts in the course of a dialogue. The pragmatic approach to dialogue analysis starts from a theory of socially situated joint action as the basis for understanding the functioning of dialogue-driven exchanges in a variety of settings. In a diachronic account of context-driven dialogic actions and interactions, Fritz (1995) emphasizes the role of dialogue in stimulating the interlocutors' internalisation of common knowledge. In his pioneering pragmatic studies on dialogue, Stati (1982) advanced the view that in terms of relational dimensions, dialogue-driven actions are argumentative in nature. Referring to the functions of dialogue, he introduces the notion of *metadialogica*, which involves three main elements: phatic, metasemantic and metapragmatic.

One of the salient categories of institutional dialogues that attracted the interest of pragmatists is the dialogue in the public sphere, and especially political dialogue. Focusing on dialogic encounters in public life, Tannen (1998) shows a deeply entrenched cultural tendency in Western culture in general, and in the United States in particular, where everyday dialogues in institutional environments are turning into confrontations or actual conflicts. She reveals that in what she calls "the argument culture", nearly everything is framed as a dispute over polarized standpoints. Exploring the multifaceted nature of the concepts of dialogue and democracy in the context of challenges from mass protest movements across the globe, and critically examining materializations of dialogue in social life, Koczanowicz (2015) offers illuminating perspectives on the theoretical and empirical interface between democracy and dialogue. Based on a pragma-rhetorical approach, Ilie (2015) found that an important function of parliamentary dialogue is to foreground or background the parliamentarians' positions, to reinforce or cancel underlying presuppositions, to understate or overstate the shifts between personal and interpersonal discourse levels. Illustrative excerpts show how parliamentarians use a range of metadiscursive strategies to signal, mitigate, or cancel parts of their ongoing discourse, as well as negotiate and co-construct their institutional ethos. Bolívar (2018) proposes a dialogue-centered approach to political communication from a critical perspective, showing how dialogue contributes to shaping the political scenario and how it can transform democratic practices that are based on conciliation and conflict avoidance. Her pragmatic focus is on the role of participants in dialogic interaction, on the discourse they co-construct and on their responsibility as social actors in democratic dialogue in a particular political culture, i.e. Venezuela.

A number of pragmatic and rhetorical typologies of dialogue have been developed as an instrument for analyzing patterns of ideal or real dialogues. Connecting the global function of a dialogue with the communicative roles of dialogue stages, Walton (1992, 2007) integrated the pragmatic notion of relevance into his analytical model of types of dialogue. According to him, relevance in dialogue varies with the type of dialogue under consideration, and it serves to highlight the ways in which dialogue shifts occur through biased argumentation, or fallacious moves. Focusing on mediated political dialogue, Berlin and Fetzer (2012) argue that the research paradigm of pragmatics offers a frame of reference meant to bridge the gap between a media-specific production and a media-specific reception of text and talk. Macagno and Bigi (2017) highlight the pragmatic structure of dialogue as a complex network of dialogical goals (e.g. persuasion, deliberation, information-sharing) that are interactively co-constructed by the interlocutors. Examining dialogue moves in relation to types of dialogue, they propose a method for the analysis of dialogue illustrated with examples from different dialogical contexts. Drawing on Dascal's typology (1998, 2008), Ilie (2021) identified three main types of polemical dialogues, i.e. *discussions* (focused on establishing the truth), *disputes* (focused on winning the argument) and *controversies* (focused on persuading the adversary/audience), all of which can account for the adversarial agenda-setting in parliamentary debates. At the micro-level, the analysis reveals the interplay and the extent to which the three polemical dialogue types crisscross, overlap and/or complement each other through the use of recurring metadiscursive strategies.

Pragmatic studies have also demonstrated their practical value with respect to man-machine dialogue systems that have been put to use in everyday life. The analysis of *dialogue acts* is a case in point, in that it seeks to improve the performance of automatic dialogue act identification and annotation. Leech and Weisser (2005) show how pragmatics contributes to the computational analysis of dialogues. One major illustration of this is the application of speech act theory to the analysis and synthesis of service interactions in terms of dialogue acts.

While a vast amount of research has been done lately on dialogue ranging from casual conversation to formal exchanges in institutional contexts, less attention has been paid to the challenges of dialogue, such as interpersonal relationship, shifting context- and interactive focus, joint management of talk-in-progress, and argumentative vs. counter-argumentative stance. The articles comprised in this special issue fill this gap by showcasing a plurality of approaches to the design, functions and impact of dialogic and metadialogic strategies in socially and politically influential discourse genres. Underlying this plurality,

there is, at the same time, a shared belief that a complex phenomenon like dialogue can only be approached by means of cross-disciplinary approaches that transcend disciplinary and theoretical boundaries.

5. The articles in this special issue

This special issue features six articles (listed below) that explore forms of offline and online dialogues enacted in a range of contexts. The first three articles examine dialogic genres of institutional communication (parliamentary, legal and educational), whereas the last three articles focus on dialogic genres of non-institutional communication (exchanges of tweets and website postings).

Ilie, Cornelia. 2022. Meta-questions and meta-answers: The interplay of metadialogic practices in PMQs. *Journal of Pragmatics* 194: 71–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2022.04.004>.

Caliendo, Giuditta and Océane Foubert. 2022. Gender representation in French Eurolect: An open dialogue between supranational and national legal varieties. *Journal of Pragmatics* 196: 54–66. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2022.04.014>.

Macagno, Fabrizio, Chrysi Rapanta, Elisabeth Mayweg-Paus, and Mercè Garcia-Milà. 2022. Coding empathy in dialogue. *Journal of Pragmatics* 192: 116–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2022.02.011>.

Stopfner, Maria. 2021. Just thank God for Donald Trump – Dialogue practices of populists and their supporters before and after taking office. *Journal of Pragmatics* 186: 308–320. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.10.002>.

Grasso, Arianna. 2022. Populist dialogues on Twitter to #PutAustraliaFirst. *Journal of Pragmatics* 193: 76–87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2022.03.014>.

Rasulo, Margaret. 2022. Dialogic patterns of the oppressor-oppressed dynamic in climate change denial. *Journal of Pragmatics* 189: 147–159. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.12.007>.

Addressing the common theme of dialogue and dialogic perspectives in a range of discourse genres, the articles in this special issue draw on a combination of pragmatics-based theoretical and methodological approaches in order to critically evaluate the notion of dialogue as both a discourse structuring principle and an interaction-driven practice. Adjusting particular analytical frameworks to the specificity of their empirical data, these authors problematize complex issues arising from the implementation of dialogic perspectives to public or private discourse genres: political debate in parliament, legal texts, classroom interaction, and online dialogic exchanges. A common denominator of these articles consists in integrating pragmatic approaches with a wide range of complementary theoretical approaches that pertain to rhetoric, relevance theory, discourse analysis, communication accommodation theory, systemic functional grammar, argumentation theory, pragma-dialectics and appraisal theory, all of which enable multi-layered and deep-going investigations into a wide range of dialogue-driven phenomena. The first three articles explore, from several analytical perspectives, representative dialogic genres of institutional communication, conveyed orally or in writing.

In the first article of this special issue entitled “Meta-questions and meta-answers: The interplay of metadialogic practices in PMQs”, Cornelia Ilie (2022) presents a critical scrutiny of the notoriously adversarial parliamentary dialogue in UK PMQs (Prime Minister's Questions) in terms of the agonistic question–answer exchange. Her analysis shows how the polarization of political power escalates as the dialogic performance interfaces with metadialogic practices, whereby the questioner (LO or opposition MP) and the respondent (the Prime Minister) evaluate, challenge and/or contest the validity of each other's input to the dialogue. The findings show that the most distinctive and genre-typical metadialogic strategies in PMQs are the meta-questions and meta-answers. By means of a multi-layered pragma-rhetorical analysis, a significant distinction is unveiled: the questions and the answers are primarily targeted by questioners (the LO or opposition MPs) and the respondent (the PM) at each other, whereas the meta-questions and the meta-answers, although addressed at each other, are mainly targeted at multiple audiences, including the public at large. The dialogic interplay of parliamentary meta-questions and meta-answers reveals, through the PM's evasiveness or failure to answer the LO's and opposition MPs' questions, a reluctance to play by the (parliamentary) rules and assume responsibility as head of government, party leader and ‘primus inter pares’ in the UK Parliament.

The second article of this special issue, entitled “Gender representation in French Eurolect: An open dialogue between supranational and national legal varieties” and co-authored by Giuditta Caliendo and Océane Foubert (2022), has a twofold aim: first, to examine the extent to which a potential dialogue exists between French supranational and national legal varieties, and second, whether this dialogue is moving in the direction of a (more) gender-fair representation in French. A qualitative analysis was carried out to identify specifically selected gender-related terms from the specialised subcorpus of gender-related legislation, looking at occurrences of the selected terms from the masculine generic, binary, and neutral categories. At the same time, the data emerging from the subcorpus of French national laws have evidenced a higher use of binary and neutral forms than EU directives. The analysis of the datasets has revealed an open dialogue between the three legal varieties under scrutiny, as in the end no converging strategy seems to prevail. The findings of this investigation indicate that the strategies for the representation of gender across the legal varieties observed can vary significantly, alongside with their degree of gender fairness. Consequently, the authors reached the conclusion that despite this lack of consistency, a first step has been taken towards a more fair representation of gender. For further key insights on the longitudinal observation of gender representation in legal discourse, a replication of this study is envisaged.

Fabrizio Macagno, Chrysi Rapanta, Elisabeth Mayweg-Paus, and Mercè Garcia-Milà (2022) devote the third article of this issue, entitled “Coding empathy in dialogue”, to proposing a coding scheme that should capture the dialogicity and relevance in the development of common ground in classroom interactions. The proposed codes are illustrated with samples taken from a large corpus of dialogue data collected in four European countries (England, Germany, Portugal, and Spain) within a European project (Cultural Literacy Learning Program – CLLP) focused on the development of dialogue and argumentation skills in pre-primary, primary and secondary students, with a view to improving communication and understanding of diversity. The goal of this methodological article is to operationalize empathy as a discursive construct, manifested in children's and adolescents' dialogic interactions. The authors examine the relationship between understanding and common ground by analyzing the process that allows the development of dialogic empathy, and propose an operationalization of dialogic empathy, first, by designing a coding scheme that allows the detection of the moves in a conversation, and second, by explaining through examples from the multicultural corpus how dialogic empathy contributes to developing a common ground between interlocutors. The results show how the degrees of dialogic empathy can be measured by considering the pragmatic purpose of the move, and also by capturing other-orientedness.

The remaining three articles are concerned with the exploration of dialogic perspectives in online dialogue genres, both institutional and non-institutional. In all these cases the boundaries of what can be called a dialogue have expanded to include currently widespread genres of online dialogue, such as tweets and website communication discourses.

The online dialogues of populists are the focus of Maria Stopfner's (2021) article entitled “Just thank God for Donald Trump – Dialogue practices of populists and their supporters before and after taking office”. She analyzes and compares tweets by far right populist Donald Trump and his supporters with tweets by nationalist conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his followers based on tweets posted in two weeks before and after the respective politician took office. Her analysis shows how the rapport between populists and populist supporters is mutually created or disrupted in online dialogues on Twitter through the use of ethotic arguments and indexicals. The results indicate major differences as well as similarities in view of dialogue practices of populist leaders and their followers. Thus, Trump shows a preference for offensive eristic dialogues, in contrast to Johnson's preference for subtle critique. In view of the rapport between populist leader and populist supporters on Twitter, Trump's supporters seem to adopt and thus converge with the eristic dialogue style of their political leader, as the share of negative ethotic arguments significantly increases in the first six months of Trump's presidency. Johnson's followers, on the other hand, are not as confrontational and aggressive in their dialogue practices, even though they do not necessarily converge with his “high” dialogic style, as can be seen in their ample use of negative ethotic arguments, whereas Johnson himself refrains from using such arguments.

The next article, authored by Arianna Grasso (2022) and entitled “Populist dialogues on Twitter to #PutAustraliaFirst” is also concerned with the dialogic mechanisms of online populism conveyed in tweets, but these are approached from a different perspective. Drawing upon Halliday's metafunctions of language, tweets posted by selected populist politicians active in Australia have been investigated to gain insights into the semantic features and dialogic functions of recurrent hashtags, and thereby explore the populist Twittersphere in Australia, in relation to the refugee issue. The mapping of the hashtag relational network has been carried out by means of Social Network Analysis and Systemic-Functional Grammar, which helped identify three macro-thematic areas: Australian politics, immigration and terrorism. The results show that a few hashtags were widely used by populist leaders as slogans promoting Australian populism, which focuses on identifying a double common enemy: on the one hand, the political establishment, which is to be blamed for misgovernment, and on the other, immigrants and refugees, who are considered to increase the risk of terror in Australia. A main goal of hashtagging in tweets is to engender a scaremongering uptake in populist leaders' interlocutors, instilling a sense of suspicion and hostility towards immigrants and asylum seekers. The hashtagging practice has been shown to index intertextual and dialogic connections among the networked members, while echoing other populist phenomena outside Australia.

The last article of this special issue, authored by Margaret Rasulo (2022), is entitled “Dialogic patterns of the oppressor-oppressed dynamic in climate change denial”. Its aim is to expose the ongoing confrontation between power structures that are responsible for spreading climate denial theories, and climate science that is involved in promoting not only global climate cooperation and regulation, but also climate literacy among the general public. The concerted effort of climate denialists to discredit scientific consensus regarding anthropogenic causes of climate change is analyzed through an *action-reaction* dialogic construct embedded in a series of key quotes collected from the counter-denial website *DeSmogBlog*. The corpus-based analysis focuses on the denialists' key quotes, using the appraisal framework and relevance theory. The findings of the analysis indicate that the climate change debate as it is instantiated by the examined key quotes is mainly driven by uncollaborative attitudes underlying denialist intention and is essentially governed by linguistic mechanisms that can be defined as “egocentric”. Such mechanisms were found in the denialists' practice of repeatedly downplaying or dismissing climate evidence through a variety of modes, at different times, and in various settings. The author concludes that the polarization of behaviours regarding climate change is exploited by the denialists to fortify the public's belief in conspiracy theories and wrongdoing practices on the part of mainstream climate science, thus repeatedly enacting the oppressor-oppressed dynamic.

6. Conclusions

Due to their complex and diverse nature, dialogic practices shape, and at the same time are shaped by the language users' roles, motivations, strategies, goals and position-takings in a wide range of contexts. This explains why the findings of

investigations on dialogue or dialogic perspectives on communication are bound to have a significant impact on similar or related areas of pragmatic research concerning social, psychological, educational, political and legal aspects of dialogue-related language use.

A major innovative value of the articles that make up this special issue consists in shifting the emphasis from the study of forms of dialogue in communication to the examination of context-specific dialogic patterns and goal-oriented strategies of dialogic communication. The authors explore various discourse genres from a dialogical perspective, broadening the scope of pragmatic research with interdisciplinary perspectives that aim to complement and/or expand pragmatic approaches to participant-steered and context-shaped dialogic forms of interaction.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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