

Textual-Discursive Dialogism: A Counterfactual Framework

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Abstract

This essay aims to undertake a study, in the light of concrete philosophy (Santos, 1956, 1960, 1967), of the counterfactual schematism within which dialogism is forged as an explanatory concept. Thus, in order to organise the formal architecture of this article, two sections are created: Criticism of dialogism, in which some comments about this metaphor developed by Bakhtin are described in an overview, and Counterfactual schematism of dialogism, in which the aim is to demonstrate its weaknesses through experiential exemplification. One of the results was the idealisation of dialogical relations and the weaknesses of dialogism in the face of authoritarian discourses, demonstrating, among other things, that the theoretical universalisation proposed by Bakhtin, although ingenious, often operates as an abstract schema, far removed from the concrete reality of discursive practices.

Keywords

Dialogism, Counterfactuality, Concrete Philosophy

1. Initial Considerations

Much has been said about dialogism since its creation by the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin. Regardless of whether the philosopher or his circle of students and collaborators was the author of this concept, the shadow of the effects of such metaphorical production is felt in practically all areas of the human sciences. From literary theories to sociological investigations, philosophical ethics and political ethics, among others, to pedagogy, dialogism is considered an explanatory finding for phenomena inherent to language itself. In this direction, the productivity according to which dialogism guides a countless number of studies, investigations, monographs, dissertations and theses, as well as underpinning the theoretical ma-

trix of pedagogical political projects and their guidelines, such as the BNCC, makes it a kind of talismanic term.

In view of these considerations, we need a more accurate explanation of the concept of dialogism, which occupies a central position in the work of Bakhtin and his commentators. It is a conception according to which human language and communication are, in their essence, constitutively dialogical phenomena, in other words, irreducible to the logic of monologue or semiotic uniqueness. In Bakhtinian terms, every utterance is part of a pre-existing discursive chain and is always an explicit or implicit response to previous discourses and, at the same time, an anticipation of future replicas. Language, therefore, does not emerge from the subject in isolation, but is constituted as a field of ideological forces, permeated by social, historical and cultural voices in constant conflict and negotiation.

This concept aims to break with structural paradigms that saw language as a closed or neutral system, revealing its deeply relational, historical and ideological character. The notion of dialogism, thus conceived, unfolds in correlated and equally complex categories, such as polyphony, understood as the coexistence of multiple autonomous voices in the same discursive fabric, and heteroglossia, which designates the multiplicity of social languages (dialects, registers, jargon, discursive genres) in tension within a culture. These categories not only enrich the analysis of literary texts, a field favoured by Bakhtin, but also offer theoretical contributions for examining discursive practices in educational, media, political and institutional contexts.

However, this essay intends to undertake a study, in the light of concrete philosophy (Santos, 1956, 1960, 1967), of the counterfactual schematism within which dialogism is forged as an explanatory concept. In order to do this, in addition to analysing its effects through the concreteness of experience, we turn to its metalinguistic properties. Before going into the first proposition of this text, a list of criticisms levelled at the notion in question is drawn up. Thus, in order to organise the formal architecture of this text, two sections are subsequently created: Criticism of dialogism, in which some comments about this metaphor developed by Bakhtin are described in an overview, and Counterfactual schematism of dialogism, in which the aim is to demonstrate its weaknesses through experiential exemplification. At the end, in the Final Considerations, the path taken here is evaluated with a view to its contribution to clarifying dialogism and, eventually, some of its uses.

In this paper, the term *counterfactual schematism* refers to a theoretical model that presupposes as real what is not verifiable in empirical or historical terms. It denotes an abstract framework that is imposed a priori on discursive phenomena, often projecting dialogical relations where none exist in practice. Dialogism, from this perspective, becomes a counterfactual schema when it assumes the presence of symmetrical, reciprocal, and ideologically open interactions in situations that are, in fact, marked by exclusion, silence, or unilateral coercion.

2. Criticism of Dialogism

Although Bakhtin's dialogical theory revolutionised language studies and the hu-

man sciences by emphasising the polyphonic and social nature of communication, his work is not without its fundamental criticisms. Scholars from different theoretical strands point to epistemological gaps, conceptual idealisations and practical limitations that deserve in-depth analysis. Here are three criticisms of dialogism: conceptual hybridity and lack of systematisation; idealisation of the dialogical relationship and power asymmetries; and limitations in the face of authoritarian and monological discourses. Let's return to each of these.

Bakhtin postulates that every utterance is a response to previous discourses and, simultaneously, an invitation to future responses, configuring what he understands as the intrinsically responsive and responsorial nature of language. From this perspective, the act of enunciating is not reduced to an isolated emission of meaning, but is based on an ethic of listening, through which the discursive subject is constituted in relation to otherness. For the author, language is never the univocal expression of a closed subjectivity, but is always crossed by other voices, constituting itself as a dialogical field of forces in tension. Herein lies the conceptual hybridity and lack of systematisation that runs through the works produced by Bakhtin and his collaborators.

However, this generous conception of dialogue has been progressively strained by criticism aimed at problematising its idealising potential, especially with regard to the structural asymmetries that permeate the production and circulation of discourses. Maingueneau (2008: p. 112) says: "Dialogism presupposes an illusory symmetry between interlocutors, ignoring the fact that discourses are articulated in fields of force where social, racial and gender hierarchies determine who can speak and who will be heard". This warning points to the need to consider that interlocutors don't always share equal conditions of enunciation and, more seriously, that certain voices are systematically silenced or delegitimised within communication circuits. Therein lies the idealisation of the dialogical relationship and asymmetries of power.

The critique becomes even more forceful when read in the light of post-colonial theories. Spivak (2010: p. 27) asks a crucial question: "Can the subaltern speak in a Bakhtinian dialogue? Or is his voice always already mediated by the codes of the coloniser?". This questioning destabilises the premise of a universally accessible interlocution, revealing that subaltern voices are not only excluded, but, when heard, are filtered and reinterpreted by dominant codes in order to neutralise their otherness. Here, the critique of dialogism is articulated with the denunciation of the colonial epistemology that underlies Western modes of knowledge production and discursive recognition.

This concern echoes acutely in the contemporary virtual space, especially in digital social networks, which are commonly extolled as arenas of discursive plurality and polyphony. Souza and Carvalho (2022: p. 94), in an accurate analysis of political discourse on Twitter, conclude that: "The apparent polyphony of social networks masks the reproduction of narrative monopolies, where peripheral voices are co-opted or erased by algorithms". In such environments, algorithmic

logic acts as a new structural censorship device, masking inequalities under the guise of communicative democratisation. It's a kind of "controlled heteroglossia", in which the multiplicity of voices formally exists, but is functionally subordinated to invisible mechanisms of exclusion.

Still from a materialist perspective, Marxist criticism emphasises the conditioning of dialogical relations by economic structures. [Eagleton \(2011: p. 145\)](#) aptly points out: "The materiality of the relations of production conditions the dialogue: an exploited worker does not dialogue on an equal footing with his boss, no matter how polyphonic the text". This statement reinforces the notion that dialogue does not take place in an ideological vacuum, but is always entangled in the logics of domination that regulate the social space, revealing that even in apparently open contexts, the place of speech is also a place of power.

Bakhtin contrasts dialogism with monologism, which he associates with authoritarian and closed forms of discourse, incapable of welcoming otherness. However, several theorists have argued that Bakhtinian theory underestimates the effectiveness of contemporary monological strategies, which not only suppress the plurality of voices, but simulate it. On this point, [Bourdieu \(1996: p. 89\)](#) observes that "certain fields, such as the religious or political, institutionalise invisible censorship, defining what is sayable and what is heresy". In other words, the possibility of saying something, or even taking part in a supposed dialogue, is subordinated to pre-established norms that delimit what is admissible, establishing symbolic forms of discursive coercion.

In totalitarian regimes, this operation reaches its most perverse form. [Fairclough \(2001: p. 76\)](#) warns that: "Authoritarian discourse is not simply monologic; it appropriates dialogic elements to simulate consensus, as in the use of fake news that cites false 'sources' to legitimise single narratives." Here, monologism camouflages itself under the guise of dialogue, appropriating the appearance of discursive diversity to consolidate the hegemony of a single worldview. It's a parasitic discourse that uses the rhetoric of contradiction to neutralise it. These are the limitations of authoritarian and monological discourses.

This strategy is also diagnosed by [Chauí \(2014: p. 203\)](#), when analysing fascist rhetoric: "The effectiveness of monologism lies in its ability to parody dialogue, creating the illusion of debate while reinforcing dogmas." In such contexts, authoritarian discourse not only refuses to listen, but deliberately simulates dialogue as a form of symbolic manipulation. This parody of dialogue represents a direct challenge to the Bakhtinian thesis that every utterance is, by nature, open to response, as it demonstrates that the discursive space can be captured by strategies that interdict, from the outset, the possibility of a true contradiction.

The three main criticisms of dialogism have been duly demonstrated: the first concerns conceptual hybridity and the lack of theoretical systematisation, which compromises the clarity and applicability of the concept; the second criticism points to the idealisation of the dialogical relationship, often disregarding the asymmetries of power that run through discourses; finally, the third criticism

highlights the limitations of dialogism in the face of authoritarian and monological discourses, in which openness to otherness is drastically reduced or even annulled. With these objections outlined, we now move on to an analysis of the counterfactual schematism of dialogism, in which we investigate the tension between its theoretical proposal and the limits of its operationalisation in the face of discursive reality.

3. Counterfactual Schema of Dialogism

Dialogism is the idea that every utterance is part of a network of social voices. Bakhtin says: “The word is always charged with ideological or experiential content or meaning. There is no such thing as a neutral word” (Bakhtin, 2011: p. 95). This means that every speech or text responds to previous utterances and anticipates future responses, configuring itself as a dialogical act. For Bakhtin, language is a social and historical phenomenon, marked by continuous interaction between interlocutors. Monologism, in contrast, ignores this plurality, imposing a single perspective (Bakhtin, 2008).

This is a very important point for understanding the counterfactual schematism of dialogism: the context, or the conditions of reception/production of the text. The relationship between dialogism and context is central to Bakhtin’s theory, because dialogism presupposes that every utterance only acquires meaning within a specific social, historical and cultural context. For Bakhtin, language is not an abstract system, but a living practice, moulded by the interaction between interlocutors and the material conditions in which it occurs. In the author’s own terms: “The word is half alien. It becomes ‘own’ when the speaker populates it with his intention, his accent, when he masters it for his own ends” (Bakhtin, 2011: p. 113). This appropriation only occurs in a specific context, which determines the meaning of the word. For example, the expression “freedom” varies depending on whether it is used in a political speech, a literary work or an everyday conversation.

Irony is an emblematic case of the dialogue-context relationship. Its meaning depends entirely on the context shared between speaker and interlocutor. For example, the phrase “What a marvellous day!” can be sincere or ironic, depending on factors such as the tone of voice, the weather or the relationship between the speakers. Bakhtin explains: “Valuative intonation is the element that most directly links the utterance to extralinguistic reality” (Bakhtin, 2011: p. 134). However, ignorance of certain cultural elements, or even ignorance of the interlocutors participating in the communicative process, can alter the understanding of irony. However, it is precisely on the concrete situation that the counterfactual schematism of dialogism operates, equalising all the participants. In other words, dialogism, as conceived by Bakhtin, starts from the universalising assumption that everyone knows the circumstances in which a text is produced, since it dialogues with other texts and their conditions of production and emergence, i.e., the context.

In order to oppose the logicist counterfactual schematism present in dialogism, we start from another theoretical system, concrete philosophy. Concrete philoso-

phy, formulated by Mário Ferreira dos Santos, is grounded not only in ontological identity (“being is, and non-being is not”) but in a comprehensive system that unites metaphysics, logic, and existential phenomenology. Central to this philosophy is the rejection of abstractions that disconnect thought from lived experience. Instead, Santos proposes a method that begins from the *real factum*—the empirical and phenomenological givenness of things—and proceeds to structured reasoning only when it remains tethered to this concrete base. In this sense, discourse is never detached from the socio-historical presence of the subject, and theories that do so risk becoming logically elegant but existentially void.

This is based on the principle of identity, which states that “being is, and non-being is not” (Santos, 1956: p. 45). This ontological basis rejects philosophical systems that prioritise idealistic or reductionist abstractions, such as positivism. For Ferreira dos Santos, concrete reality is the starting point for any investigation, integrating existential, logical and metaphysical dimensions (Santos, 1960). How can the whole context be predicted? How can someone who doesn’t know that one text is derived from another understand the second without the first? According to the answers to these questions, dialogism is only functional from a theoretical point of view because it makes its adherents high scholars, or rather, because it makes them divine beings capable of knowing which words dialogue with words and precisely because they know which words and with whom they dialogue.

Dialogism, as a theoretical proposal, can incur a certain abstractism when it detaches itself from the concrete conditions of discursive production, operating with the idea of dialogue as a universal and timeless principle, often without considering the historical, social and institutional determinants that regulate the circulation and recognition of voices. This abstraction manifests itself in a counterfactual schematism: it starts from the premise that every enunciation is, by definition, dialogical, even when there is, in fact, no room for response, negotiation or displacement of meaning. Dialogism thus becomes a theoretical structure projected onto situations that, in practice, resist interlocution, which compromises its analytical power when dealing with authoritarian discourses, institutionalised performances of knowledge-power or communication regimes that neutralise otherness.

The counterfactuality of dialogism becomes evident in contexts in which the formal structure of the discourse suggests a dialogical openness, but this openness is only simulated or cancelled out by unilateral discursive practices. A clear example is official pronouncements by state or corporate institutions that use the rhetoric of listening and participation, such as public hearings, popular consultations or “dialogue with society” campaigns, but whose decision has already been made, making it impossible to effectively co-construct meaning. Another case occurs in school or academic environments marked by rigid hierarchies, where the word of the teacher or expert is imposed as the incontestable truth, even if it is wrapped in an apparent communicative exchange. On social networks, too, although there is a multiplicity of voices, we see the formation of discursive bubbles and the spread of hate speech or cancellation, which eliminate the space for listening to others.

In these situations, the dialogical principle remains only on a theoretical level, functioning as an abstract scheme that has no empirical correspondence, in other words, it reveals its counterfactuality.

The concrete philosophy of Mário Ferreira dos Santos (1956) allows us not only to correct the excesses of dialogism, but also to question its very conceptual core. By affirming that thought must start from the concrete real and remain connected to it, Santos criticises any form of theoretical construction that is divorced from existence, which includes, to a certain extent, dialogism, when it is taken as the universal structure of language. The dialogist presupposition, according to which every enunciation is necessarily aimed at the other, involves a metaphysics of otherness that doesn't always occur in reality. There are communicative situations in which the other is purely a rhetorical function, and the discourse is constituted without being open to response or relationship, as occurs, for example, in totalitarian, performative or self-referential discourses. In these cases, the demand for dialogue loses its explanatory force.

The selection of Mário Ferreira dos Santos as the philosophical interlocutor in this critique is not arbitrary. Among realist or materialist thinkers, Santos offers a rare synthesis of metaphysical rigor and empirical anchoring. Unlike Marxist or analytic approaches that may privilege social totalities or logical atomism respectively, Santos constructs a philosophical method that insists on the immanence of existence and the indispensability of phenomenological contact with reality. His framework proves especially potent for discourse analysis, where abstraction must always be measured against experiential validity.

It is worth acknowledging that Bakhtin was not unaware of monologic or authoritarian tendencies. His concept of the “authoritative word”—that which demands recognition without reply—reveals his sensitivity to discursive asymmetry. However, what this essay critique is not the Bakhtinian awareness of such dynamics, but the subsequent tendency of dialogism's theoretical reception to downplay or transcend these tensions in favor of an idealized polyphony. The contribution here is not a wholesale rejection of dialogism, but rather a reorientation: dialogism must be reframed as one possible mode of interaction among many, not as a universal horizon of language.

Concrete philosophy, on the other hand, starts from the concrete existence of the subject and language as manifestations rooted in the world, recognising that discourse can both open up to the other and close in on itself. Therefore, by absolutising the dialogical dimension, dialogism incurs an idealistic schematism, which concrete philosophy denounces as an abstraction dislocated from reality. Thus, Santos (1956) offers us the conceptual tools to understand that not all discourse is, by nature, dialogical, since the true criterion of philosophical validity lies in its correspondence with lived reality.

The concrete experience of literary reading offers an eloquent example of the limitations of dialogism as a universal explanatory scheme. Imagine a student who, without any familiarity with the historical and cultural context of Tsarist

Russia or 19th century Brazil, comes into contact with dense works such as *Crime and Punishment*, by Dostoevsky, or *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, by Machado de Assis. Even without the keys to dialogue, i.e. without knowing the implicit interlocutors, the ideological clashes or the multiple voices that theoretically make up the novel, this reader is still able to grasp figures, human dilemmas, moral tensions and existential contradictions that resonate with their own concrete experience. This demonstrates that meaning does not necessarily depend on a conscious chain of dialogue or a relational structure between historical voices, but can emerge directly from the reader's experience as a subject situated in the world.

For Mário Ferreira dos Santos (1956, 1960, 1967), the possibility described above reveals that language and understanding start from a logos rooted in existence and not from previously conceived theoretical schemes. Dialogism, in this case, reveals its counterfactuality: it projects a demand for dialogue where, in fact, meaning takes place without it, through concrete, sensitive and existential means. Therefore, concrete philosophy confirms that meaning is not an exclusive product of intertextuality, but an ontological actualisation that occurs in the encounter between the being and the work, independently of idealised dialogical mediation.

The counterfactual schematism of dialogism also extends to the field of textual genres, where its abstract nature is even more evident. The attempt to justify the organisation of texts and discourses on the basis of dialogical relationships, as the Bakhtin-inspired tradition does, ignores the fact that textual typification predates this conception and finds more solid foundations in classical approaches, such as Aristotle's. In his *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher was the first to say so. In his *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher identified different modes of textual composition (epic, lyric and dramatic) based on formal, functional and rhetorical criteria, without resorting to the notion of dialogism. These genres are organised based on communicative intent, internal structure and relationship with the world, and not on the assumption of a constitutive interlocution between voices, as Soares (2025) explains about the four discourses (poetics, rhetoric, dialectic and logic).

In light of the above, applying dialogism as an interpretative and explanatory key to the constitution of textual genres therefore represents a theoretical overlap that disregards both the rhetorical tradition and the formal and pragmatic autonomy of the texts themselves. The concrete philosophy of Mário Ferreira dos Santos (1956, 1960, 1967) reiterates this point by demanding that philosophical and analytical categories be grounded in reality: if genres can be understood without the mediation of dialogism, then dialogism presents itself as an unnecessary abstraction, that is, a counterfactual scheme that claims universality where there is a plurality of concrete and historical foundations.

Therefore, it is clear that dialogism, when elevated to the status of a universal explanation of discursive-communicational processes, proves to be an excessively abstract and counterfactual analytical scheme. Its indistinct application to phenomena as diverse as literary reading, the constitution of textual genres or the institutional production of discourses ignores the concrete singularities of each

enunciative practice, falling back on generalisations that say little about the real experience of language. By disregarding previous traditions, such as poetics and Aristotelian rhetoric, and by projecting dialogicity as the ontological condition of every utterance, dialogism loses contact with the firm ground of reality, precisely what the concrete philosophy of Mário Ferreira dos Santos (1956, 1960, 1967) demands as a minimum criterion of validity.

Instead of describing in a rigorous and phenomenologically rooted way the ways in which meaning emerges in the concrete fabric of discourses, dialogism incurs in the theoretical anticipation of categories that, although conceptually ingenious, lack effective empirical correspondence. This anticipation transforms dialogism not into a theory proper, subject to verification, falsifiability and revision, but rather into a hermeneutic device that operates by projection: it imposes an a priori relational model on the diversity of discursive practices, the validity of which is presumed rather than demonstrated. By postulating dialogicity as a constitutive structure of every enunciation, regardless of its historical materiality or pragmatic effects, dialogism empties itself of analytical power and approaches a metaphysics of language, whose explanatory circularity reduces its ability to discriminate, qualify and historicise discursive phenomena.

Of course, abstraction is not inherently problematic. Theoretical models, by necessity, abstract from the empirical to reveal patterns, tendencies, and structures. The challenge lies in discerning when abstraction illuminates reality and when it distorts it. The critique of dialogism advanced here does not deny the utility of abstraction per se, but contests its transformation into a totalizing explanatory grid. *Counterfactual schematism*, then, refers not to abstraction in general, but to abstraction that disavows the very limits of its applicability—especially when it effaces discursive realities that resist dialogical framing.

Its schematic nature, as it pretends to be a universal grammar of verbal interaction, and its counterfactual nature, as it ignores situations in which there is no real dialogical openness, such as in dogmatic, automated or coercive discourses, deeply compromises its epistemological operability. Faced with this, a critical revision is needed that not only curbs the universalising impetus of dialogism, but also reinserts the study of discourse in the effective coordinates of language in use, as demanded by philosophies based on the immanence of reality, such as the concrete philosophy of Mário Ferreira dos Santos (1956, 1960, 1967). Only in this way will it be possible to restore to thinking about language its ontological density, its descriptive responsibility and its analytical vocation.

4. Final Considerations

The central objective of this study was to undertake a study, in the light of concrete philosophy (Santos, 1956, 1960, 1967), of the counterfactual schematism within which dialogism is forged as an explanatory concept, highlighting its counterfactual character detached from the material and historical conditions of enunciation. By articulating criticisms of conceptual hybridity, the idealisation of dialog-

ical relations and the weaknesses of dialogism in the face of authoritarian discourses, the article demonstrated that the theoretical universalisation proposed by Bakhtin, although ingenious, often operates as an abstract schema, distant from the concrete reality of discursive practices.

Based on empirical examples, such as literary reading without contextual mediation, the simulation of dialogue in institutional pronouncements and the formation of discursive bubbles on social networks, it was confirmed that dialogism, in its idealised form, does not take into account the complexity of communicative phenomena, especially in contexts marked by asymmetries of power or symbolic coercion. The omission of previous theoretical traditions, such as Aristotle's poetics and rhetoric, and the projection of dialogicity as an inherent condition of every utterance, distance dialogism from tangible reality, contrary to the basic principle of Mário Ferreira's concrete philosophy dos Santos (1956, 1960, 1967), which demands a theoretical link to reality.

Instead of rigorously describing the real processes of meaning production, dialogism anticipates them through idealised categories with no empirical correspondence, becoming more of an interpretative mechanism than a theory that can be verified. Faced with this schematic and counterfactual character, a critical review is imperative that repositions the study of discourse in the concrete terrain of linguistic practices, ensuring analyses rooted in the materiality of communication. This makes dialogism a counterfactual schematism that operates fundamentally on the theoretical grid alone.

Logical analysis can do without concrete facts, as dialogism does, but when it does, it loses its intended explanatory capacity. For this reason, dialogism and its effects can be reformulated to deal with exclusive aspects of the logical order pertinent to universalising schematism when counterfactual, since they cannot be taken as totalising. As a result of this observation ratified by concrete philosophy (Santos, 1956, 1960, 1967), it is important to return dialogism to the pragmatism of intention, and then to its rightful place as an interpretative possibility of utterances-texts, but never, as is currently the case, to the place of a conclusive theory of any and all production independent of the participants in the concrete communication situation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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