

## ***MPL in Context: Some Questions / MFL em contexto: algumas questões***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Brazilian translation (2015) of Patrick Sériot's Preface to the French translation (2010) of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (MPL)* provides a good opportunity to discuss this work and its relevance for the field of Human Sciences, considering different possible interpretations. In this sense, this work presents a discussion on questions that deserve, in our opinion, to be addressed both in Sériot's work (taken as an example of *MPL*'s interpretation) and in Voloshinov's.

**KEYWORDS:** Voloshinov; *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*; Epistemology and Dialogical Theory

### **RESUMO**

*A tradução brasileira (2015) do Prefácio de Patrick Sériot para a tradução francesa (2010) de Marxismo e filosofia da linguagem proporciona uma boa oportunidade para discutir a obra e sua relevância no campo das Ciências Humanas, considerando distintas interpretações possíveis. Nesse sentido, este trabalho apresenta uma discussão sobre questões que, a nosso ver, merecem ser abordadas, tanto do trabalho de Sériot (tomado como exemplo de interpretação de MFL) como da obra de Voloshinov.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Voloshinov; Marxismo e filosofia da linguagem; Epistemologia e teoria dialógica*

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## Introduction: *MPL*, Translation and Resignification

The publication of a new translation of a fundamental work, such as *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (MPL)*,<sup>1</sup> is always positive, since each translation brings not only the traces of its chronotopic situation but also the specific inflections of their translators as legitimate interpreters of the translated work. The timely initiative of Marcos Bagno and Parábola Editorial [Parabola Publishing House] to translate and publish respectively the Preface to the French translation of 2010 (by Patrick Sériot and Inna Tylkowski-Ageev) made available a relevant document that deserves to be studied from both the point of view of the criteria for translation (as an implicit interpretation) and the explicit interpretation of the work, something on which the Preface focuses.

Sériot states (2015, p.22) that “[a] retranslation is necessarily an echo, an allusion, an implicit critique of the first one.”<sup>2</sup> If that is so, a commentary to the Preface of a translation that, in 2010, intended “to try to be closer to Leningrad in 1929 and farther from Paris in 1977” (2015, p.22)<sup>3</sup> constitutes a meta-echo, a meta-allusion, an *explicit* metacritique, a critical evaluation of the work’s interpretation presented in the Preface. Sériot says that, contrary to the translation of 1977, his own Preface makes explicit the criteria followed, and that his context allows a “more serene” (2015, p.23)<sup>4</sup> approach to the work of 1929. Thus, he makes explicit the position from which he speaks and declares what he intends to do, and this is praiseworthy. In our opinion, there are many possible serene interpretations of *MPL*, and that is the focus of our paper, which always dialogues with Sériot, but not exclusively. Thus, his text is not this paper’s pivot, but it is taken as an example of possible interpretations that may be both respected and questioned. And we also say the place from which we speak.

The search for the contextualization of the translated work implies the intention for a greater proximity to the original Russian text. This proximity is obviously attempted with the eyes of someone in 2010, and not from 1929, although the context of

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<sup>1</sup> VOLOŠINOV, V. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and R. Titunik. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Text in Portuguese: “Uma retradução é forçosamente um eco, uma alusão, um questionamento implícito da primeira.”

<sup>3</sup> Text in Portuguese: “tentar ficar mais perto de Leningrado-1929 e mais longe de Paris-1977.”

<sup>4</sup> Text in Portuguese: “mais serena.”

the time is taken into account – and this is also praiseworthy. However, considering the terminological imprecision of 1929 and specifically of *MPL*, this greater proximity is attempted by a reading done in 2010 both of the translated text and the 1977 translation. Sériot’s criticism to the 1977 translation focuses specially on the interpretation done at that time, which was based mainly on Julia Kristeva’s idea of “situating Bakhtin in the French context” and of “adapting it [*MPL*] to the French perspective” (SÉRIOT, 2015, p.23).<sup>5</sup> This interpretation was linked to political and intellectual interests. In our opinion Sériot recognizes that the interpretation given by his 2010 translation, which, we repeat, intends to read the text as he attentively considers its original context, from which the text was supposedly taken by other translations, is also influenced by the French perspective and the context of 2010, which are different from 1977. The same happens to our Brazilian perspective and context of 2015 in this paper.

For Sériot, “[t]ranslations grow old (...) while the original is not altered, but its interpretation, its reception is modified in time and space” (pp.23-24).<sup>6</sup> In other words, he agrees that a retranslation is *another* interpretation, equally context-situated. Stating that, Sériot accepts the fundamental tenet of dialogism. Although he recognizes that his interpretation follows criteria that are distinct from those of Yaguello and Kristeva, he does not deny that his interpretation is just another one – an interpretation that may also be questioned, but that is useful because it unveils nuances not found in others. We must praise Sériot’s criticism of “hurried translations” that “create partial analogies” (2015, p.24)<sup>7</sup> between concepts that stem from different epistemological universes. He even alleges that “there are as many interpretations [of *MPL*] as there are translations” (2015, p.27),<sup>8</sup> something we cannot but agree.

In this sense, Grillo (2014), who is currently translating *MPL* from Russian into Portuguese, discusses, for example, the reduction of the complexity of the original terms by forcibly using less complex modern vocabulary in *MPL*’s translations: the Russian term for “discursive genres of daily life” was translated to French and Portuguese (in 1977) as “social dialectology” (2015, p.80),<sup>9</sup> a term that is typical of the time of the

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<sup>5</sup> Text in Portuguese: “situar Bakhtin no contexto francês” [...] “acomodá-lo ao olhar francês.”

<sup>6</sup> Text in Portuguese: “As traduções envelhecem (...) enquanto o original não se altera. Mas sua interpretação, sua recepção se modifica em função do tempo e do espaço.”

<sup>7</sup> Text in Portuguese: “traduções apressadas” [...] “criam” [...] “analogias parciais.”

<sup>8</sup> Text in Portuguese: “existem tantas interpretações [de *MPL*] quanto traduções.”

<sup>9</sup> Text in Portuguese: “gêneros discursivos do cotidiano” [...] “dialetologia social.”

translations but that does not show the complexity of the original term. The English translation is “behavioral speech genres,” which maintains “genre,” but reduces it to “speech.” The translators add an adjective that removes “daily life,” imposing it a behaviorist inflection, something that, considering its exegetical tradition, *MPL* cannot have.

Translations, we contend, always imply a positioning regarding two extremes: What is the necessary degree of faithfulness to the original relationship among interlocutors? To what degree may one adapt it according to the new relationship among interlocutors that the translated text creates? Extreme fidelity can draw the text apart from its translation audience, in case the translation does not create bonds between cultures, terminologies, etc.; extreme infidelity can sever the bonds between the text and its culture, terminologies, etc. and subject it to the parameters of another culture, terminology, etc. In consequence, the ideal to be reached is a balance: to move between these extremes in order to show the interlocutors of the translated text (not the ones of the source text) what a work brings from its culture so that readers can create their own intercultural dialogue. In a way, the translator brings a word of authority in this “re-interlocution” process (SOBRAL, 2008).

We may infer from this that the same problem inevitably affects *both* translations that emphasize situating the source text in a given translation context but removes it from its original context, *and* translations that declare their wish to be closer to the original context but somehow ignores the context in which they come to exist. However, translations that have differing emphases but that adequately consider both the original context and that where they were produced are equally legitimate. As current translation studies prove, translations must respect *both* the context of the translated work and the context of translation, something that is always a challenge.

Well, published in France, in French, in 2010 and 1977, none of the aforementioned translations is exempt from the traces of their time and space, the legitimate translators’ interests, moment, and purview (explicated in greater or lesser detail). That establishes the principle according to which any translation, as faithful as it is, is an interpretation – which, however careful, meticulous, respectful, is no less revealing of its origin. Thus, it is not less or more true than any other, but it is endowed with a specific degree of veracity. Every translation, due to the new nuances that it

unveils, reconstructs, recreates the framework for the understanding of the translated work. In the next sections, we are going to take Sériot's Preface as an example of *MPL*'s interpretation and present our interpretation of issues that, in our opinion, deserve be commented on, regarding both the Preface and Voloshinov's work.

### **1 *MPL*: Context, Paternity, "The Bakhtin Circle"**

More than presenting criteria for translations, the Preface explicitly presents an interpretation of the translated work. It is a reading in 2010 that, compared to the one in 1977, shows precisely that chronotopes and social evaluations of enunciators affect utterances – as Sériot himself recognizes. And this is precisely what interests us. Here are some examples of those traces, which point to different, but equally legitimate, enunciative directions: *moyen* [resource] (1977) becomes *medium* [support] (2010); *communication* [communication] and *système of communication* [communication system] (1977) become *échange* [exchange] (2010);<sup>10</sup> *matériau social de signes* [social material of signs] (1977) comes to be *matériau sémiotique* [semiotic material]; *matériau sémiotique* [semiotic material] (1977) changes to *matériau idéologique* [ideological material] (2010); and *idéologique* [ideological] (1977) is translated as *sémiotique* [semiotic] (2010; cf. GUILHAUMOU, 2012, paragraph 6).

First of all, it is worth emphasizing the relevant criticism done by Sériot on some "deification" of *MPL*'s theses (which apply to the other authors of the so-called Circle) when he asserts that he intends to "free [*MPL*] from the hagiography and the idolatry that puts an enormous weight on Bakhtinian studies" (2015, p.26).<sup>11</sup> The "Circle"'s work is indeed a result of its time, and it brings its traces; we can read it with the aim of treating new objects and necessities. In so doing, we have to responsibly produce what we intend to do, having the work as a point of departure. Sériot appropriately points to the terminological fluctuation, as well as to the metaphorical nature of the use of terminology in *MPL*, something which in some cases creates what for Sériot is a "frantic merry-go-round" (2015, p.26)<sup>12</sup> in which a definition is never presented. He

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<sup>10</sup> Sériot admits that the Russian word may be translated both ways.

<sup>11</sup> Text in Portuguese: "livrar da hagiografia e da idolatria que exercem seu peso enorme sobre os estudos bakhtinianos."

<sup>12</sup> Text in Portuguese: "ciranda frenética."

also recognizes this to be typical of *MPL*'s time, something that brings a non-negligible number of problems for those who would expect, from a Russian work of 1929, a kind of terminological academic rigidity whose recognized value would start only much later (and that is contested today).

At the time, there were already the so-called “specifiers,” somewhat positivist, to which groups such as that of Voloshinov were opposed. They defended another type of science in which specification was not so valued: *nauka* or “academic science” vs. *inonauka*, or “another type of science,” distinct from *anti-nauka*, or “anti-science” and from *nenauka*, or “non-science.” At present, beyond the terms and expressions used, and their possible “unmistakable” definitions, Bakhtinists, including the so-named Brazilian School, which we hasten to say is not exactly a school, but a Brazilian trend of interpreting dialogism, make efforts to define the parameters of the dialogical theory in the context of each work and in the relationship among the works, instead of trying to identify academically “correct” definitions. This evokes Wittgenstein’s idea that the term or expression used has no relevance as long as there is a description able to attend to its heuristic necessities.

Sériot dedicates illuminating pages to the question of the real existence of a “Bakhtin Circle,” a controversial issue that even leads to debates on whether the genitive in “Bakhtin’s”<sup>13</sup> is inclusive or exclusive: a Circle that Bakhtin was *a member of*, or *his own* Circle or a Circle led by him. The author concludes that if there was a Circle, it was not led by Bakhtin. He attributes the dissemination of the term “The Bakhtin Circle” in 1967 to Leontiev and the use of “The Bakhtin School” to G. Superfin. This is due to the importance that Bakhtin’s name acquired in Russia and in the Western world and to the fact that Medviédev and Voloshinov did not survive Bakhtin. V. Ivanov (for reasons Sériot was not able to unveil) proposed that Medviédev and Voloshinov were Bakhtin’s disciples and what is more that Bakhtin was the hidden author of their works. And Bakhtin, as Sériot states, never claimed to have a circle of his own although in some moments did *not* contribute to resolve the doubt. Sériot researched on and presented with exemption the circumstances of this behavior (as well as of the several different curricula Bakhtin prepared for different purposes), and he claims that he did not obtain the data that could explain this oscillation or the

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<sup>13</sup> TN. The Bakhtin Circle is called O Círculo *de* Bakhtin [Bakhtin’s Circle] in Portuguese and Le Cercle *de* Bakhtine [Bakhtin’s Circle] in French, which explains the idea of the genitive (*de*) in both languages.

motivations of this behavior. It is known that Bakhtin, in 1973, in an interview to Duvakin that Sériot cited, (years before Ivanov had used the term) mentions a circle that existed around him and that according to him was called “the Bakhtin Circle.” However, he never asserts the existence of a Circle led by him.

We must emphasize that the Preface brings one of the broadest and most exempt panoramas of the issue on paternity of Bakhtin’s, Medviédev’s and Voloshinov’s works, discussing the topic with seriousness and a scientific spirit. Thus, by means of concrete data he produces an important document that is to be taken into account for a sober approach. We need more works aiming at a proper explanation of the question, or maybe we must stop considering it so important, because it is not decisive to understand *MPL* and other works.

Beyond this question – and shallow polemics around it – several groups of scholars now accept that there is a set of common conceptions in the works of Bakhtin a philosopher), Medviédev (a scholar in literature) and Voloshinov (a scholar in language), that the authors had different departure interests and emphases, and that they studied different objects stemming from a *fundamental core of thought* that integrates them. Sériot shows that this was the object of several debates at the time and has been until now. Sometimes Bakhtin allowed people to think that he was the author of his colleagues’ works; other times he said that he was not. He even indicated who the authors of *MFL* and *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*<sup>14</sup> were in a letter to Kozinov.

In any case, the issues on paternity, the Bakhtin Circle, and the Bakhtin school do not interfere in the assessment and reception of the works in our days. Gadamer (1989, p.296)<sup>15</sup> affirms that “[n]ot just occasionally but always the meaning of a text goes beyond its author.” This implies that questions on authorship do not have a direct influence on interpretations of the works, which, in fact, do not need an empirical author, but a concrete one. In spite of the abundant data that the Preface lists (among other serious studies that are not biased for or against this or that authorship), there are no effective conditions for a real reconstitution of the context. Thus, we only have a set

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<sup>14</sup> TN. The English version of this work was published under the name Bakhtin/Medvedev [BAKHTIN, M./MEDVEDEV, P. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*. Translated by Albert J. Wehrle. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978].

<sup>15</sup> GADAMER, H. *Gadamer, Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Sheed & Ward, 1989.

of works united by certain common assumptions and parameters, which, based on them, constructed a framework able to be the foundation for a theory of subjects, language in general and literature in particular, as well as for studying non-verbal languages – by means of a meticulous and committed work of each scholar.

In his conclusion about paternity Sériot declares that

The most likely is that all these works result from multiple discussions, that the influence could be multilateral and that each author, in his own way, elaborated upon themes that were discussed in a great number of situations with varied interlocutors. (2015, p.59).<sup>16</sup>

The author draws an important biographical sketch of Voloshinov, which clearly explains his intellectual profile and the incidence it had on *MPL* proposals. For him, *MPL* selects authors and topics, and specific aspects of these authors' works, such as Vossler and Humboldt, for example, in order to create a synthesis of the study of language in the context of a Marxist philosophy. As it happens, these proposals did not incorporate the Communist doctrines (not necessarily Marxist) that were adopted at the time, which is confirmed by the negative reactions to *MPL* in the USSR. These reactions were also due to the “wrong” moment in which the work came to light, something that may explain many of its characteristics. Sériot agrees with that:

*MPL* could not have arrived in the works moment: 1929 is the year of the “Great Turn” [or Great Break], a movement in which scientific discourse becomes an object of ideological control by the Party. Up to that time, there were very different, frequently incompatible ways of “being a Marxist” in the Soviet Union... (p.72).<sup>17</sup>

Several commentators of the work incorporated or disregarded a certain confusion between the Marxism Party (with its “pragmatic” version of Marx’s theories) and Academic Marxism (as a sociological method of study), something that Sériot recognizes. The same applies to the disregard of the presence of theses from dialectical materialism philosophy in the works of the “Circle.” Sometimes this disregard led some

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<sup>16</sup> Text in Portuguese: “O mais verossímil é que todas essas obras sejam o fruto de discussões multiformes, que a influência possa ser multilateral e que cada um dos autores tenha elaborado à sua maneira temas que eram discutidos em numerosas ocasiões com interlocutores variados.”

<sup>17</sup> Text in Portuguese: “MFL não podia ter chegado em pior momento: 1929 é o ano da “Grande Virada,” movimento em que o discurso científico se torna objeto de controle ideológico do Partido. Até então, havia maneiras muito diversas, frequentemente incompatíveis, de “ser marxista” na União Soviética...”



to consider Bakhtin idealistic – something only acceptable if proposed in contrast to English Empiricism, a situation in which being idealistic would have a positive meaning. Some vital elements of Dialectical Materialism are in Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, published in 1909.<sup>18</sup> It extends Marx's and Engels' works regarding the construction of the Marxist philosophy, in its theoretical and practical aspects, by means of the study of several "bourgeois" philosophies and the development of the natural sciences and mathematics.

That revolutionary work inspires Bakhtin's, Voloshinov's and Medviédev's works, as we may observe by reading it attentively. It is not a strictly Marxist proposal, be it academic or from the Party, but a dialectical materialism proposal of a broader philosophical scope, a totalizing (and not totalitarian) view of phenomena. To give an example, we see in Lenin's words quoted below the basis of the emphasis, in the works by the "Circle," on the search of the *unity* of studied phenomena, instead of approaching them partially or from a given partial point of view:

From this Marxist philosophy, which is cast from a single piece of steel, you cannot eliminate one basic premise, one essential part, without departing from objective truth, without falling a prey to a bourgeois-reactionary falsehood (LENIN, 1947, p.338).<sup>19</sup>

Lenin refuses here both rationalistic philosophy, which is removed from concrete phenomena, and empiricist philosophy, which creates improper generalizations. He insists on the question of *unity*: a proposal that strives to encompass all the assumptions of the method and all the parts of the object in order to explain it. In this sense, Bakhtin's, Medvedev's and Voloshinov's works are generally structured according to three movements: (1) they begin with *concrete* phenomena (induction – the "voice" of the object), based on an asserted theoretical conception (deduction – the "voice" of the researcher); (2) they use the elements obtained in the examination of the concrete phenomena to alter, if necessary, the conception with which they began; and finally (3) they return to the object with a new understanding. This illustrates the dialectical materialism method (for historical reasons named "Marxism" at the time), which goes beyond the exclusionary Hegelian proposal of thesis-antithesis-synthesis

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<sup>18</sup> LENIN, V. L. *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*. Translated by A. Fineberg. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1947.

<sup>19</sup> For reference, see footnote 18.

because, instead of annulling, in the synthesis, the vital elements of the thesis *and* the antithesis, it maintains them, something non-existent in Russian vulgar Marxism in 1929.

In Kanaev's (2009, pp.165-188)<sup>19</sup> paper, it is possible to see more clearly the broader foundations of dialectical materialism in works of the "Circle": (1) the distinction between work hypotheses and subjective presuppositions imposed to the object; (2) the position taken by science and the defense of this opinion in a substantiated and explicit way, without adopting a partial attitude and without seeing only an aspect of phenomena; (3) the acknowledgment that generalizations, instead of being the starting point, are a point of *arrival*, which implies taking into account the concrete conjunctural specificities of the singular phenomena that are to be generalized *and* the element that unites them in a broader level; and (4) the consideration of the several aspects of the object, without creating false dominants or exogenous variables for the studied systems (SOBRAL, 2009).

Sériot declares that "*MPL* is not a linguistics treaty nor a compendium of Marxist philosophy, but a sort of Psycho-Socio-Semiotics of verbal behavior in interindividual interaction" (2015, p.84).<sup>20</sup> However, at the same time he contends (such as Yaguello had done in 1977!) that the work presents a philosophical conception of the ideological sign, being thus a work of philosophy of language. In fact, *MPL* is not a treaty of linguistics nor a compendium of Marxist philosophy, but a treaty on a philosophy of language from a Dialectical Materialism perspective: it follows the totalizing approach of dialectical materialism when it considers, in an integrated way, the elements that constitute the phenomenon as a whole: meaning and sense; individual consciousness and social constitution of subjects and senses; verbal interactions, always interindividual, and language structure; relationships between empirical subjects and enunciating subjects – as he proposes the notion of "concrete utterance."

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<sup>19</sup> TN. The English version of this paper was published under the name of Bakhtin [BAKHTIN, M. Contemporary Vitalism. Translated by C. Byrd. In: BURWICK, F; DOUGLASS, P. *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp.76-96].

<sup>20</sup> Text in Portuguese: "*MFL* não é nem um tratado de linguística nem um compêndio de filosofia marxista, mas uma espécie de psicossociosemiótica do comportamento verbal na interação interindividual."

Considering Voloshinov's proposition that consciousness can only arise and become a reality when it acquires a material embodiment in signs (1973, p.10),<sup>21</sup> Sériot declares that *MPL* proposes a hypersemioticism. In the translation of 1977, "consciousness" is used in the aforementioned passage. In Sériot's Preface, we have "experience": "There is no experience outside its embodiment in signs" (2015, p.79).<sup>22</sup> But in the translation "consciousness" is maintained. We may suppose that the final choice for the expression to be used in the translation was made after Sériot wrote the Preface. The original word is *osoznaniye*, customarily translated as "consciousness." Considering Voloshinov's conception of ideological sign, the sign is a completely external phenomenon, not an inaccessible inner content [psychical *tout court*]. If the adequate expression were "experience," we would be forced to agree with Sériot on hypersemioticism, because if experience could not happen without an embodiment in signs, everything would be a sign and there would be no reality. In the case of "consciousness," we may support Voloshinov's proposal, for what method would there be for us to have access to consciousness outside its expression in signs?

Next, Sériot raises another important issue: is it possible to consider that, according to *MPL*, there would be no difference between language and discourse? Since words in themselves would always be from somebody and as they would be already evaluated as they reach other people, there would seem to be only discourse, not language as a system. We believe that the possibility of understanding this as *MPL*'s proposal arises from the lack of precision between *meaning* and *theme* (sense), addressed in chapter 7 of *MPL*, which is precisely one of the foundations of the book's proposal, reworked exhaustively along *MPL*.

*MPL* is actually vague and repetitive (almost circular) regarding that, but we may conclude, in this entanglement, that "theme" is understood as enunciation's complete sense, which is individual and unrepeatable; it is beyond sentences, but it incorporates them: one cannot understand the valuated sense of enunciation without understanding its "meaning" in language. "Meaning," on the other hand, refers to the identical and repeatable elements of enunciation; according to *MPL*, it is essential, for theme is based on it. *MPL* even warns that people who are restricted to the individual and unrepeatable would be poor dialecticians and that people who are restricted to the

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<sup>21</sup> For reference, see footnote 1.

<sup>22</sup> Text in Portuguese: "Não existe experiência fora de sua encarnação em signos."

identical and repeatable would be poor philosophers. We thus see in *MPL* the distinction between *coming* from and *belonging* to others as well as the proposal of the ideological sign to be valued when it is used in utterances at the level of themes, and not of meanings, which belong to the linguistic system.

Sériot further asserts that translating *sobytie vyzkazyvanija* as “enunciation” is a reading of Voloshinov *via* Benveniste (2015, cf. p.91). He states that this term literally means “the event of the utterance,” which greatly resembles a modern definition of enunciation: the act in / by which utterances are produced, or the event of the production of utterances. We do not see in “enunciation” *per se* a specific influence from Benveniste, but a translation, in the West, that corresponds to “the event of the utterance.” We do not know what the reading of the 1977 translators was. Thus, although it is not rigorously an equivalent expression of the Russian term, which is more analytical, several commentators indicate that “enunciation” seems to be a legitimate synthetic version of it, a corresponding term that does not betray the valuation implied by the Russian term, partly because it incorporates “utterance.” On the other hand, since *viskázivanie* may be translated as “utterance” and *sobytie vyzkazyvanija* literally as “the event of the utterance,” it is perhaps worth considering the Brazilian proposal (cf. SOUZA, 1999), “concrete utterance,” which is understood not statically as a product but actively as the process of *verbal acting situated in concrete life*. In any case, these concepts are, in our opinion, an innovation of dialogism, when it refers to verbal interaction, for they completely reject sentences as their unit of analysis.

## 2 Two Versions of the Concept of Sign

Discussing Voloshinov’s relationship with Saussure, Sériot affirms that “from Saussure, he does not retain *anything*: there is a total rejection” (2015, p.78).<sup>24</sup> Sériot here does such a specific reading of *MPL* that he does not consider the fact that, if on the one hand the work declares that a sign is not a mental entity, but a phenomenon of the external world (which is a refusal of one of Saussure’s proposals), on the other, it claims that every sign opposes other signs and, what is more, that the understanding of a

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<sup>24</sup> Text in Portuguese: “de Saussure, ele não conserva *nada*: a rejeição é total” .

sign depends on its relationship to other signs (which maintains Saussure's proposal). Thus, although refusing Saussure's dichotomies to explain the ideological sign, *MPL* does not fall into the idealistic trap of considering the material world as being built by signs or by consciousness. Instead, it proposes a dialectical materialism conception that maintains the constitutive articulation among the several aspects of the sign as postulated therein, both in the level of meaning and the level of theme. Considered from a certain point of view, it extends Saussure's system of oppositions when it brings this latter also to the level of concrete utterances, of valuation.

We must point out that, due to its specificity, a dialectical materialism philosophical proposal cannot be assessed in terms of a concept of science that is based on absolute distinctions or dichotomies, but rather in terms of a declared effort to consider the different available aspects of the studied object without being restricted to a given excluding proposal. The emergence of the idea of interdisciplinarity in Human Sciences may be the result of two problems: the attempt to emulate the criteria used in "Hard" Sciences and the subjectivist proposals to interpret social facts. *MPL* holds these two poles in tension, making efforts to free itself from their implications by proposing a new way of seeing its object. We must see this new way according to its heuristic productivity, explicative ability, epistemological bases and context, not imposing on it, though, responsibilities that *MPL* does not have. We believe that this "tension" in *MPL* shows, in several respects, one of its most positive aspects of the "other-type-of-science" perspective, such as in the difference between meaning (*znachenie*) – the domain of Saussurean sign – and theme or sense (*smyl*) – the domain in which Saussure was not (legitimately) interested, but which was of interest to the "Circle." This distinction clearly incorporates, not in a formal way, signs as being produced by oppositions among them in the linguistic system.

A similar tension is maintained around the question of ideology. In *MPL*, opposed to the reflection theory of vulgar Marxism, not only does it depend on individual consciousness (not in a subjectivist sense), but it is also social (not individual). It does not exclude the subject from the process that creates signs, which are "neutral" in the level of meaning (Saussure) but valued in the level of sense (Voloshinov), incorporating thus the two great current trends of language study. In addition, Saussure focuses on the system of oppositions, but does not discard

speech/discourse, although he does not define it or mention it, since it is not his object of study. According to Guilhaumou (2012, paragraph 21), if for Saussure “[...] any term of language occupies the place of *something* that is not of the order of discourse,” still “only discourse may attribute a signification to this thing.”<sup>25</sup>

### 3 Voloshinov’s Dialogues with Humboldt and Vossler

Sériot claims that Voloshinov’s Humboldt is “marxized” (and “sociologized”) and Vossler is “sociologized.” As for Humboldt, we must emphasize first of all that the breadth and richness of his assertions led him to be appropriated, in different ways, by different theoreticians. According to Humboldt, although language serves communication, it is chiefly the typical human form of constituting subjects and the world, being linked to thought and to the representations of the world and the subjects. Voloshinov’s central interest in Humboldt’s theories is the word-thought dialectics: for Humboldt, the unity of the word corresponds to the unity of the concept, since the word is what makes the concept an entity of the world of thought. In other words, thought by means of the word turns the phenomena of the world into objects of science. Thought, by its turn, comes to be, by means of the word, an object of the world (something dear to Voloshinov) beyond the self, but it returns to the latter precisely in the form of the word. For Humboldt, this unity is what constitutes individuality.

Voloshinov uses the non-cognitive and subjectivist aspects of Humboldt’s proposals and makes them part of his proposition on the social-individual character of the ideological sign. It is necessary to understand ideology in *MFL*, we repeat, not in terms of vulgar Marxist theories, but as a concomitant element to any use of signs: there are no signs *in use* without valuation. Thus, in *MFL* there is a dialectical materialistic appropriation of some of Humboldt’s propositions. Voloshinov places Saussure and Humboldt in contact and brings them close to the perspective of his proposal for a dialectical materialistic philosophy of language, which seems legitimate to us, although it is possible to question such proposal.

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<sup>25</sup> Text in French: “[...] tout terme de la langue tient lieu de *quelque chose* qui n’est pas de l’ordre du discours”; “seul le discours pouvant donner une signification à cette chose.”

Vossler, a representative of a subjectivism that is exacerbated to some researchers, is reread by Voloshinov in terms of this proposal, having some relevant aspects of his theory incorporated in *MPL*. This is due to the fact that Vossler, in spite of this subjectivism, “corrects,” in Voloshinov’s opinion, the tendency that abstract objectivism has to discard the subject as the center (although not the master) of enunciation, proposing, based on Croce, an anti-positivistic conception of language. Consequently, in *MFL* Humboldt and Vossler (as well as Saussure) are present in countless proposals that are formulated based on a dialectical materialistic study of language. On this basis, *MFL* proposes an enunciative [because it is based on utterances and thus on language in use] syntactic analysis [because it considers language syntactic structure] that is little explored. The work masterfully examines the so-called “reported speech,” speech about speech, enunciation about enunciation – beyond metalanguage – showing, for instance, that direct and indirect speech are not only different syntactic structures, but also different attitudes before the discourse of the other.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4 Points of View and the Constitution of Objects**

Instead of refusing abstract objectivism and individualist subjectivism entirely, *MPL* profits from aspects that are relevant to its proposal and discards those that are incompatible. This seems to us a perfect course of action in human studies, which cannot use, for example, the laws of physics. In terms of dialectical materialism, *MPL* aims to integrate, in a specific proposal, two main trends of language, present then and today. In *MPL* criticism focuses on the fact that although these trends had some valid proposals, they failed, for, based on Voloshinov’s well-grounded point of view, they did not consider other relevant aspects or did not accept the implications of their own proposals completely. It is not about refuting or corrupting these proposals at the outset; it is about proposing a synthesis from a given declared point of view on a given object.

Sériot declares that Voloshinov despises Saussure’s famous statement that the point of view determines the object and denounces him for practicing “a particularly

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<sup>26</sup> On the idea that there are different ways of *listening* to the discourse of others, cf. Pechey (2007, pp.62-63).

monological art of ‘dialogue’” (2015, p.111).<sup>27</sup> For him, Voloshinov does not realize that he and Saussure are discussing two different things that can never meet, thus considering Voloshinov’s reading and, in consequence, his point of view not legitimate. If Sériot’s idea were right, most studies in human sciences would be compromised: the integration of different theoretical perspectives shows that discussing different things, based on different perspectives and from a given reflection that searches for some integration, does not concede to the idea that two different things can never meet, since this meeting does not exist ontologically (at the phenomena level) but epistemologically (at the level of the objects developed by science), and this is done precisely from a given point of view. Saussure’s sign is not Voloshinov’s sign, but they meet in Voloshinov’s proposal. As a researcher and not a judge, the author of *MPL* evaluated several theories in his own terms. As Faraco points out,

One of the most interesting aspects of the reception of the Bakhtin Circle’s ideas in Brazil is undoubtedly the fact that readers surrendered to Voloshinov’s rhetoric in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.

The criticism that he developed, in the second part of the book, regarding the two main trends of linguistic thought of his time – which he called “abstract objectivism” and “idealistic subjectivism” – was taken, among us, as a final condemnatory judgment on those trends. And, as such, it was repeated “*ad nauseam*” in quasi-perfect paraphrases [...] (2006, p.125).<sup>28</sup>

In the same way this uncritical and erroneous repetition creates problems, refusing to examine the legitimacy and basis of Voloshinov’s reading of Saussure at the outset leads us to disregard the fact that Voloshinov was pointing to the limits of Saussure’s proposal *from his own point of view*, which, although outside the context of Saussure’s universe, is equally legitimate. More often than not precursors pay a high price for their theoretical boldness, and this is the case of Voloshinov (and Bakhtin). Modern linguistics recognizes today that there is no study of language that ignores the *linguistic system*, the “combinatory algebra” (*langue*), or the study of *language*, the

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<sup>27</sup> Text in Portuguese: “arte do ‘diálogo’ particularmente monológica.”

<sup>28</sup> Text in Portuguese: “Um dos aspectos mais interessantes da recepção das ideias do Círculo de Bakhtin no Brasil é, certamente, o fato de os leitores terem se deixado seduzir pela retórica de Voloshinov em *Marxismo e Filosofia da Linguagem*. A crítica que ele desenvolveu, na segunda parte do livro, às duas principais tendências do pensamento lingüístico (sic) de seu tempo – que ele denominou de “objetivismo abstrato” e “subjetivismo idealista” – foi tomada, entre nós, como juízo condenatório definitivo daquelas tendências. E, como tal, foi sendo, em paráfrases quase-perfeitas, repetida “*ad nauseam*” [...]”



system of language use, not as algebraic as the other (which is not *parole per se*, but has some echoes coming from it). In the same vein, the power to dominate subjects is not attributed to the linguistic system, nor is the mental possession of the system attributed to subjects. Consequently, Saussure and Voloshinov do not talk about incompatible *phenomena*; they work with different *objects* and different emphases, or *points of view*, both equally legitimate. The synthesis of the main trends in linguistic studies done in *MPL*'s time has not been refuted thus far; it is naturally subject to critiques and reformulations, but it cannot be discarded as “blindness” to relevant aspects of the criticized proposals.

## 5 The General and the Particular in Human Sciences

The question of generalization is also addressed by Sériot, who considers *MPL* to be the proposal of a science of particularities – something that it really is and that makes it even better. From a broader perspective, we must consider the intrinsic difficulties in the task of generalizing on utterances, which are by definition unrepeatable (although a sentence could be the same in different utterances), and recognize *MPL*'s pioneering effort, which does not surrender to a sociological or a psychological trend, to a formal or an intuitive instance, proposing instead a theory of enunciation and utterances that is able to integrate the several aspects of these phenomena. In this sense, we must take into account that, according to Sobral,

[...] every generalization based on singular acts brings a double problem: how not to destroy the specificity of each specific act and how not to be lost in this specificity and, thus, stop apprehending elements common to the several acts. Because absolutely singular acts would demand absolutely *sui generis* and different agents as well as absolutely unrepeatable action situations, which would obstruct all and any generalization, a generalization that destroys whatever singularity there is in the acts would require agents that are absolutely equal among themselves as well as only one action situation – in other words, a denial of the human condition (2007, pp.11-12).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Text in Portuguese: “[...] toda generalização a partir de atos singulares traz um duplo problema: como não apagar a especificidade de cada ato específico e como não se perder nessa especificidade e, assim, deixar de apreender o que há de comum entre os vários atos. Porque atos absolutamente singulares exigiriam agentes absolutamente únicos e dessemelhantes, bem como situações de ação absolutamente irrepetíveis, o que impediria toda e qualquer generalização, ao mesmo tempo em que uma generalização

We perceive that the notion of “concrete utterance” remains a real problem to language studies, especially to proposals that aim at a formalization level that maybe could be applied to particles/waves, but not to utterances, or, on the other extreme, to those that can only see singularities. A study of utterances cannot be limited to the structure of sentences (which are really repeatable); neither can it be limited to a study of enunciations that discard sentences – although these are only a *technical apparatus* for the production of utterances. Moreover, it cannot be restricted to meanings in the dictionary or ignore them. Thus, studying enunciation is studying both its “formal apparatus” and its “enunciative acting,” and thus the situations of enunciation and subjects in their social and historical relationships. *MPL* shows that sentences are repeatable and utterances are not repeatable and that sentences and utterances are objects of generalization, but not the same kind of generalization.

*MPL* seeks to integrate the *ontological phenomena*, which are the effectively enunciated utterances – the unrepeatable event of their enunciation *hic et nunc* –, and their *epistemological nature*, which establishes them as *objects of knowledge*, the place for generalization: the object is built from a point of view whose basic assumption is the integration of enunciative situation and utterance structures, as the non-verbal and verbal aspects of the production of sense, respectively. This proposal aims at integrating the *formal* system of language and the system of language *use* by means of the incorporation and subsumption of the formal structures of signification (a necessary, but not sufficient, counterpart of sense) in the process of sense production. This process is explained in terms of a dialogical interaction, a proposal whose broadness encompasses even soliloquy as a reply to interlocutors *in absentia*, and this is a sort of revolution: the “voice” of the other does not require their physical presence, for the echoes and resonances left retrospectively by their utterances or that may come to exist in the future, prospectively, are enough.

To generalize about singularities, such as utterances, seems to require precisely a procedure, such as the pioneering one proposed by *MPL* (as well as by Bakhtin’s philosophy of the act, in 1916, for example): to integrate the ontological (phenomenon) and the epistemological (object) from the point of view of the “event of the utterance”

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que apague o que há de singular nos atos requereria agentes absolutamente iguais entre si, bem como uma única situação de ação, ou seja, uma negação da condição humana.”

or the “concrete utterance,” i.e., an unrepeatable event that shares with other unrepeatable events certain formal aspects at the level of the linguistic system and certain social and historical procedures for enunciating. According to *MPL*, signification is appropriated by the act of the enunciation of subjects in interaction in order to instate senses that can only be apprehended if utterances, the act of enunciation and enunciating subjects as well as the situation of enunciation (in terms of the traces that the latter leaves in utterances, a unity of discourse) are considered concomitantly.

If we do not accept that relationships between peculiarities and generalization are not theorized exclusively according to models and hypotheses that are acceptable to some theoretical perspective (but that are not part of *MFL*'s context), we cannot perceive that the book proposes precisely a way of realizing that a *phenomenon* (a concrete fact) becomes an *object of knowledge* by means of an operation of the researcher aiming to build this object – from the ontological to the epistemological perspective. One of the ways for doing it may be to formalize hypotheses and to propose a model. However, human sciences have long been demonstrating that this is not a *sine qua non* condition. What is more, quite frequently models turn into straitjackets in which there are not concrete phenomena anymore, but the useless formal elegance of the theory.

## Final Remarks

In his conclusion, Sériot asserts that “[i]t was necessary to show that it is not possible to understand Volochinov’s conception without knowing the immediate context of his thought” (p.119).<sup>30</sup> And he has done that: not only by knowing it, but also by allowing others to know. He adds that “[w]e hope that this work evokes comments and other translations” (p.120).<sup>31</sup> We understand “work” here as the translation of *MPL* and his Preface, which is a careful study of the work’s context and a detailed comment with which we may disagree, but that makes sense from Sériot’s point of view.

Since he have regarded the Preface as a historical study and a critical comment, exceptionally valuable and with a seriousness that is lacking in some detractors of the

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<sup>30</sup> Text in Portuguese: “Era preciso mostrar que não se pode compreender a concepção de Voloshinov sem conhecer o contexto imediato de seu pensamento.”

<sup>31</sup> Text in Portuguese: “Esperamos que este trabalho venha a suscitar comentários e outras traduções.”

works of the so-called Circle, we hope to have contributed by commenting on it in order to show its merits and to point some questionable aspects, which nevertheless reflect legitimate reading possibilities. To understand the Preface, we felt the need to know Sériot's immediate context – in the same way he acted regarding *MPL*. In consequence, our critique aimed to attenuate some points because we understood that he, in his context, could not have made some things or prevented himself from doing others. On our part, we also could not make certain things or prevent ourselves from doing some others. What we judge attenuated will maybe be considered radical by some and weak by others. These valuations are part of what we could call “dialogical circuit.”

From our point of view, *MPL* is one of the most successful attempts to oppose *nauka* (academic science) to *inonauka* (another type of science) – distinct, as we have said, both from *anti-nauka*, or “antiscience,” and *nenauka*, or “not science.” Consequently, to generalize on unrepeatable phenomena consists, for *MPL* and for the Bakhtin Circle's general point of view, in identifying what is common to all of them (in the case of language, the formal structure of language and enunciation procedures), what appears in all utterances when they are uttered, and equally what each of them has of singular, what makes each of them different from each other in relation to the production of sense. We hope that these “Notes at the Margins of a Preface,” which are so refutable and marked by a given Brazilian contextual point of view of 2014/2015 as the Preface commented on is by the French context of 2010, evoke other comments and other translations, in that case, distinct interpretations.

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