

**The Concept of Understanding for Bakhtin and the Circle:
Reflections for the Educational Process / *O conceito de compreensão em
Bakhtin e o Círculo: reflexões para pensar o processo educativo***

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ABSTRACT

Understanding is a process that grounds educational activity and enables the development of teaching and learning. This article presents a theoretical effort to synthesize the concept of understanding in the works of Bakhtin and the Circle. This paper was based on a review of the works *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and *Freudianism: a Marxist critique*; and on a review of the essay *The Problem of Speech Genres*, in the collection BAKHTIN, M., *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, and the essay *Discourse in the Novel*, in BAKHTIN, M., *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*. According to the Circle, understanding is composed of concrete, ideological, and axiological elements; it is a process that allows the representation and extension of communication.

KEYWORDS: Understanding; Ideological sign; Education; Bakhtin and the Circle

RESUMO

*A compreensão é um processo que fundamenta a atividade educativa e permite o desenvolvimento do ensino e da aprendizagem. Este artigo apresenta um esforço teórico para sintetizar o conceito de compreensão presente nas contribuições de Bakhtin e do Círculo, baseado em uma revisão das obras *Marxismo e filosofia da linguagem. Problemas fundamentais do método sociológico na ciência da linguagem* e *O freudismo, bem como dos ensaios Os gêneros do discurso, presente na coletânea Estética da criação verbal, e O discurso no romance, da coletânea Questões de literatura e de estética: a teoria do romance, de M. Bakhtin. De acordo com o Círculo, a compreensão é composta por elementos concretos, ideológicos e axiológicos, além de ser um processo que permite a representação e o prolongamento da atividade comunicativa.**

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Compreensão; Signo ideológico; Educação; Bakhtin e o Círculo*

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Introduction

Teaching and learning are different, complex and interdependent processes that compose educational activities. There is no consensus in the literature on what these processes are, but rather a broad range of theoretical alignments that develop principles for these activities (SAVIANI, 2013).

Independently of these principles, education is essential for humanity, as it is responsible for the transmission¹ of accumulated knowledge and it can produce knowledge during this activity. Teaching and learning are processes basic to the understanding of historical-cultural configurations, given that it is from culturally accrued knowledge – in its advances and regressions – that human beings are capable of understanding the universe and acting in society. Therefore, the purpose of education is the development of subjects who are able to appropriate and master cultural tools to understand the diverse determinations in their surrounding environment.

Understanding, in its turn, is a fundamental process of educational activity: on the one hand, the subject responsible for the teaching intends for the learner to understand something; on the other hand, the learner him or herself desires the understanding of a given object. Through understanding, human beings establish a variety of relationships with one another, the environment, objects, or even with the knowledge created by them.

The present article is based on both of these premises to reflect on the concept of understanding in the works by Bakhtin and the Circle. It does so by reviewing the works *Marxism and philosophy of language* and *Freudianism: a Marxist Critique* as well as some essays titled *The Problem of Speech Genres*, in the collection BAKHTIN, M., *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, and the essay *Discourse in the Novel*, in BAKHTIN, M., *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*.

Concerns with the process of understanding are present in Bakhtin and the Circle's contributions once this process is essential for communicative interaction between subjects. References on *understanding* are found especially in the Circle's discussions on the nature of language. The present article presents a synthesis of the concept of understanding to establish parameters to apply the concept in the education sphere. The

¹ This is not a reference to transmission as a teaching method that has been widely criticized; rather, it is the process of upkeep and production of human culture through generations.

present work adds to others that analyze or aim to employ the concept of understanding as delimited by members of the Circle (ANGELO; MENEGASSI, 2011; ZOZZOLI, 2012; BARBOZA; REGO; BARBOSA, 2013; MATUSOV, 2015; LIMA; RABONI, 2018). However, there is no theoretical work in the specialized literature that organizes the dimensions and the meanings of understanding as a concept proposed from that perspective. Therefore, in spite of acknowledging the advances of investigations on the subject, the present article is predominantly oriented by the Circle's productions. Results of this synthesis point to three aspects of understanding that articulate these orientations: ideological, axiological, communicative; besides the dimension related to symbolic representation.

1 The Subject who Understands and the Materiality of Social Interactions

Comprehending what understanding is for the Circle requires a synthesis on the notion of subject from that perspective. In: *Freudianism: a Marxist Critique*, Voloshinov (1976)² puts forth a critical discussion on the conception of the abstract biological subject, since it is impossible to dissociate subjects and their concrete conditions. From birth, subjects are part of well-delimited social groups that determine both the subjective constitution, and the material conditions, of their existence (FREITAS *et al.*, 2015). It is not a generic being that is born, but the son of a baker, a carpenter, a banker, etc. Subjects, according to the Circle, are essentially social; therefore, they occupy positions in society, are part of social groups, represent individual or collective interests. Ultimately, they are not inert to the dynamics of society; on the contrary, they produce and are produced by it (VOLOSHINOV, 1976).³

Freitas *et al.* (2015, p.52) summarize the conception of subject in Bakhtin and the Circle's contributions:

[...] as a set of social relationships, as a social subject from and in history. But this social subject does not eclipse the individual. The Bakhtinian subject is constituted in the relations with other subjects. In order to become a subject, the existence of an 'other' who constitutes it

² VOLOSHINOV, V. *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*. Translated by I. R. Titunik. New York: Academic Press, 1976. This is one of the works whose authorship is disputed between Bakhtin and Voloshinov.

³ See footnote 3.

is necessary. The 'I' only becomes an 'I' when the 'other' is turned towards the 'I' in the condition of a you.⁴

Claiming the subject is a social being does not refer exclusively to the being that lives in society. For the Circle, such is a reductionist and mistaken interpretation of its assumptions. Undoubtedly, the being lives in society; however, there are implications that define them, especially because the subject is constituted through the interaction with the other. Individual and collective experiences with the other and the world allow the subjects several characteristics. The subject's belonging to social classes exerts several coercions on the possibilities and experiences that they will have in life. Even though these are singular experiences that vary from one subject to another, social influence is exerted on the individual. Therefore, the subject can be understood as a singular synthesis of proper elements of other subjects, experiences and other elements that make up its subjectivity.

The social nature of the subject is also highlighted by Pires and Sobral (2013) in their discussion of the ontological statute of the subject based on the Circle's contributions. These authors highlight that “[a]ll subjects come to be, or, better, are always becoming subjects, on the basis of their relationships with other subjects. But each one does it in an individualized way” (PIRES; SOBRAL, 2013, p.212).⁵ They add that:

for Bakhtin each subject is “populated” by multiple others, is in a sense fragmented both internally and externally, but nevertheless is a unique, irreplaceable being, due to “unfinishedness” and “situatedness”: there is no identity as a product, but a continuous self-identification process that begins at birth and ends at death, the only moments each subject is completely alone (PIRES; SOBRAL, 2013, p.215).⁶

⁴ In the original: “como um conjunto de relações sociais, como um sujeito social da e na história. Mas esse social não abafa o individual. O sujeito bakhtiniano é constituído nas relações com outros sujeitos. Para ser sujeito, é necessário haver um outro que o constitua. O eu só se torna um eu quando o outro se volta para o eu na condição de um tu.”

⁵ PIRES, V.; SOBRAL, A. Implications of the Subject's Ontological Statute in the Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov Circle's Discursive Theory. Translated by Pietra Acunha Pereira. *Bakhtiniana*, v. 8, n. 1, pp.207-220, Jan./Jun. 2013. Available at <https://revistas.pucsp.br/bakhtiniana/article/download/13785/11710>. Access on: 25 Feb. 2019.

⁶ In the original: “para Bakhtin, cada sujeito é “povoado” por múltiplos outros; é, num certo sentido fragmentado internamente e externamente, mas, mesmo assim, é um ser único e insubstituível, devido ao “inacabamento” e à “situacionalidade”: não há identidade como um produto, mas um processo de autoidentificação contínuo que se inicia com o nascimento e encerra com a morte, os únicos momentos em que cada sujeito está completamente sozinho.”

Therefore, the social is appropriated by the being to produce the individual who, in their turn, is determined by the singularity of lived experiences. The Circle's position points to an interpretation that postulates the determination⁷ of the individual by the social. Thus, the individual in itself does not exist, but the singularity of social experiences that produce a unique and unequalled subject. Even the individualistic action is seen by Bakhtin and the Circle as social because "[a]ny motivation of one's behavior, any instance of self-awareness is an act of gauging oneself against some social norm, social evaluation – is, so to speak, the socialization of oneself, and one's behavior" (VOLOSHINOV, 1976, pp.86-87).⁸

The individual's constitution takes place through the multiple interactions one establishes with the surrounding environment. Experiences are internalized and become a part of what the subject is, that is, an ever-changing being because their experiences only end as the subject dies, i.e., when they no longer are.

These experiences are possible due to the materiality of the subject's interactions with the world. Human beings are capable of living only that which is detectable by their senses or produced by their imaginations.

Acknowledging the social constitution of the subject requires the discussion of the interaction between individuals. Social interaction necessarily demands the "other" even though they can be replaced with an average representative of a social group or the appropriation of social elements, such as social norms that can influence one's actions (VOLOŠINOV, 1986).⁹ Therefore, even when the "other" is not present in the interaction, the social is present to indicate socially accepted or rejected activities.

⁷ In *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*, Volóchinov indicates that the concept of determination converges with the interpretation of historical and dialectical Marxism. When addressing the relationship between base and superstructure, Volóchinov indicated that the base determines the superstructure then he defends: "If what is meant by causality is mechanical causality (as causality has been and still is understood and defined by the positivistic representatives of natural scientific thought), then this answer would be essentially incorrect and contradictory to the very fundamentals of dialectal materialism" (VOLOSINOV, 1986, p.17); then he adds: "The material of the verbal sign allows one most fully and easily to follow out the continuity of the dialectical process of change, a process which goes from the basis to superstructures" (VOLOSINOV, 1986, p.24). In this sense, the concept of determination is understood not as a type of setting pre-conceived limits based on ideal propositions, but as the existence of pressures exerted by the concrete conditions of production (WILLIAMS, 2011). All mentions of the determination are to be thus interpreted.

⁸ For reference, see footnote 3.

⁹ VOLOŠINOV, V. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Social interaction, in its turn, is commonly accompanied by language materialized in words. Words are established as the interactive link between communicative subjects. If the focus is placed on the utterance, there will be elements to determine the interaction between individuals, such as the experienced historical context and the social norms. The Circle conceives the utterance as the unit of social communication, established by concrete elements that are capable of expressing ideological and semantic content; while every utterance enters the chain of discursive communication by answering to previous utterances, they foster future utterances (VOLOŠINOV, 1986).¹⁰ Based on the materiality of utterances, subjects can comprehend meanings; however, it is not words as units of a language that work in the production of meaning, rather, it is the ideological sign.

2 Every Understanding Carries an Ideological Orientation

Vološinov (1986)¹¹ approaches the issue of the sign by defending its concrete and ideological nature. The Circle argues that the ideological sign necessarily demands concrete utterances; that is, the ideological sign is produced in social contexts that are percolated with interests. Therefore, the utterances are determined by concrete conditions of discursive production. Aware that each social group is capable of producing particular ideological orientations, Vološinov (1986, p.14)¹² highlights that:

Each field possesses its own ideological material and formulates signs and symbols specific to itself and not applicable in other fields. In these instances, a sign is created by some specific ideological function and remains inseparable from it. A word, in contrast, is neutral with respect to any specific ideological function. It can carry out ideological functions of any kind – scientific, aesthetic, ethical, religious.

The ideological functions pointed by Vološinov (1986)¹³ are numerous. They vary according to concrete situations of production, and they can contemplate processes the distortion of reality as well as processes that seek the faithfulness between signs and the

¹⁰ For reference, see footnote 9.

¹¹ For reference, see footnote 9.

¹² For reference, see footnote 9.

¹³ For reference, see footnote 9.

reality they aim to represent. In general, it is possible to understand that ideological functions vary in a range from human oppression to emancipation.

Consequently, displacing ideological signs of social groups and/or institutions that have produced them can lead to faulty analyses, and the denial of the basic principles of the Circle's propositions: utterances are produced in concrete situations (VOLOŠINOV, 1986).¹⁴ This interpretation becomes clearer by interpreting the concept of determination and by reflecting on the implications of the social determination of utterances.

Ideological signs are appropriated by subjects and influence the constitution of human consciousness. The Circle highlights the importance of the sign on consciousness and thought, which are essential in the constitution of one's personality, social nature, and understanding. Therefore:

What is needed is profound and acute analysis of the word as social sign before its function as the medium of consciousness can be understood. It is owing to this exclusive role of the word as the medium of consciousness that *the word functions as an essential ingredient accompanying all ideological creativity whatsoever*. The processes of understanding any ideological phenomenon at all (be it a picture, a piece of music, a ritual or an act of human conduct) cannot operate without the participation of inner speech (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.15; emphasis in original).¹⁵

The process of understanding concerns consciousness which is determined, in its turn, by the ideological signs. This means that understanding can be interpreted as a complex function that is based on the concrete conditions of human activity, which determine the ideological signs. These are, in their turn, responsible for the constitution of consciousness. Finally, consciousness is capable of understanding, that is, of attributing ideological signs to the object of understanding, which means engaging inner speech. Vološinov (1986, p.37) highlights:

The understanding of any sign, whether the inner or outer, occurs inextricably tied in with the *situation in which the sign is implemented*. This situation, even in the case of introspection, exists as an aggregate of facts from external experience, the latter commentating upon and illuminating a particular inner sign. It is always *a social situation*. Orientation in one's own soul (introspection) is in actuality inseparable

¹⁴ For reference, see footnote 9.

¹⁵ For reference, see footnote 9.

from orientation in the particular social situation in which the experience occurs [emphasis in original].¹⁶

The situation of realization of the sign mentioned by Voloshinov contemplates several verbal and non-verbal elements, such as different ideological signs present in the situation, the context of ideological production, the social groups participating in the interaction, etc. Therefore, understanding is in tandem with an ideological system, that is a set of values, beliefs, concepts and ideas shared by a given social group that allows the subject to place themselves in respect to the object of their understanding. Vološinov (1986, p.91) indicates that “The established ideological systems of social ethics, science, art, and religion are crystallizations of behavioral ideology, and these crystallizations, in turn, exert a powerful influence back upon behavioral ideology, normally setting its tone.”¹⁷ The behavioral ideology can be understood as “whole aggregate of life experiences and the outward expressions directly connected with it” (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.91).¹⁸ In this sense, we can understand that there are more structured ideological systems, which correspond to the already crystallized and relatively stable ideological spheres of creation, and less structured, which correspond to the behavioral (daily) ideology.

It is in the social interaction that the materialization of ideological signs that support one’s understanding occurs. Therefore, it is extremely plausible that arguments forged by an ideological perspective are invalid for subjects constituted by antagonistic ideological fundamentals. It is not simply a matter of ignoring arguments, but failing to realize their very ideological basis, which can also implicate the questioning of their rationale. On this issue, Vološinov (1986, p.35)¹⁹ emphasizes that:

[...] any cognitive thought whatever, even one in my consciousness, in my psyche, comes into existence, as we have said, with an orientation toward an ideological system of knowledge where that thought will find its place. My thought, in this sense, from the very start belongs to an ideological system and is governed by its set of laws.

¹⁶ For reference, see footnote 9.

¹⁷ For reference, see footnote 9.

¹⁸ For reference, see footnote 9.

¹⁹ For reference, see footnote 9.

To illustrate the ideological issue present in understanding, we highlight the interpretation of the concept of liberty by two ideological orientations: Liberalism and Marxism. In order to do so, first we present the meaning of the concept as used in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,²⁰ written in 1798 under influence of Liberalism. Article 4 of the Declaration establishes that:

Liberty consists in being able to do anything that does not harm others: thus, the exercise of the natural rights of every man has no bounds other than those that ensure to the other members of society the enjoyment of these same rights. These bounds may be determined only by Law.

This concept of liberty is based on Liberalism and clearly postulates liberty as a right that does not outweigh other rights such as property, safety and resistance to incarceration, highlighted in different articles in the Declaration. At the same time, it inhibits the individual action illegitimated by the Estate: “no individual may exercise any authority that does not expressly emanate from it” (DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND OF THE CITIZEN, 1789).²¹ It is noteworthy that the relation between liberty and property for Liberalism is an essential condition for the development of capitalism. Therefore, the concept of liberty includes that of private property.

On the other hand, as he synthesized the concept of liberty in the works of the Young Marx, Guedes (2011, p.161) argues that

Liberty, from the critical Marxist perspective, is constitutive of human praxis and refers to the relation between teleology and causality. [...] such causalities appear as established facts and perpetuate the defense of a sociability founded on inequality, in which there is no possibility of autonomous choice. This ratifies the necessary overcoming of the defense of individual liberty associated to limits imposed by an abstract universality founded on moral maxims and juridical formulations.²²

²⁰ HUMAN Constitutional Rights. *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. No translator credited, 2008. Available at: <http://www.hrcr.org/docs/frenchdec.html>. Accessed on: 25 Feb. 2019.

²¹ For reference, see footnote 19.

²² In the original: “Liberdade, na perspectiva da crítica marxiana, é constitutiva da práxis humana e se refere à relação entre teleologia e causalidade. (...) tais causalidades aparecem como fatos dados e perpetua-se a defesa de uma sociabilidade fundada na desigualdade, em que não há possibilidade de escolhas autônomas. Ratifica-se, assim, a necessária superação da defesa da liberdade individual associada aos limites postos por uma universalidade abstrata fundada em máximas morais e em formulações jurídicas.”

According to this perspective, the concept of liberty distances itself from individual freedom and questions private property and the inequality it generates. This concept indicates that inequality inhibits autonomy, because autonomous choices are determined by concrete conditions of human activity, which are not similar due to social inequality. Therefore, Marx sees inequality as one of the elements that prevent individual liberty leading to the interpretation that liberty and property cannot be equally important rights. Furthermore, the Marxist interpretation questions the foundation of liberty in institutional liberties, based on either moral principles or the Estate (juridical principles). Therefore, the Marxist liberty questions the basic principles of Liberalism, such as private property and its concentration, and the moral and/or juridical legitimation.

These examples show the differences between two ideological systems regarding the concept of liberty, showing how two social groups place themselves in respect to ideological signs in order to either understand a particular concept (freedom) or to mobilize other signs during the process of understanding. It is noted that values shared by these social groups determine the ideological signs produced by them reciprocally.

Contemplating educational practices from the perspective of ideological signs implies the denial of any type of neutrality. The impossibility of neutrality is determined by a series of factors, among which the advocacy of one type of knowledge over another. It is not possible to conceive of the teaching of the Sciences as a neutral activity as there is an intrinsic value that establishes the relevance of knowledge associated to this curricular subject regardless of the coincidence of this value to those advocated by students or their guardians. Therefore, the teaching of the Sciences (or any other curricular subject) in formal education is based on the ideological orientation of the validity of this knowledge. Although there are practices that attempt to relativize this orientation, the very structure of elementary education reaffirms certain ideological stances toward the object of study.

In addition to the institution's ideological orientations, systems and teaching professionals, students also attribute ideological value to signs to understand curricular knowledge. These values might be oriented either toward the validation of the teacher's ideological perspective or to oppose that perspective as they defend positions and ideas from other spheres of ideological creation.

3 Every Understanding Conveys Axiological Orientation and It Is Continuation of the Communicative Act

The issue of axiological orientation in regard to understanding, that is, the responsive act that attributed value to utterances is one of the most evident issues in the academic works that are theoretically based on the contributions by Bakhtin and the Circle (FREITAS; AGUIAR, 2010; CORSINO, 2015; BORTOLOTTI; FIAD, 2017; LIMA; RABONI, 2018; ALMEIDA; LIMA; PEREIRA, 2018). This orientation alludes to the judgment value present in utterances; thus, both the subject of the enunciation and their interlocutor act on the utterance, delineating axiological positions. According to Vološinov (1986, p.70):²³

In actuality, we never say or here *words*, we say and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. *Words are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behavior or ideology*. That is the way we understand words, and we can respond only to words that engage us behaviorally or ideologically [emphasis in original].

The axiological aspects of understanding complement the ideological ones: it is not possible to determine a relation of dependence between them. Rather, it is more adequate to understand the relations between ideology and axiology in communicative production as dialectical, since ideological production lacks and allows for axiological positioning and axiological production lacks and allows for ideological positioning.

The impossible neutrality of ideological signs demands an axiological position from interlocutors. Thus, “[a]ny genuine kind of understanding will be active and will constitute the germ of a response” (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.102).²⁴

It is noteworthy that the axiological position in the act of understanding attributes an already-appropriated ideological sign to the process of understanding.

To understand another person’s utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. For each word of the utterance that we are in process of understanding, we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words. The greater

²³ For reference, see footnote 9.

²⁴ For reference, see footnote 9.

their number and weight, the deeper and more substantial our understanding will be (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.102).²⁵

Consequently, understanding implicates the possibility of orienting oneself to and replying to utterances by the other. In this process, ideological perspectives can be confronted: disputes that are determined by the concrete conditions of enunciative production. If, on the one hand, the concrete situation of social communication determines the orientation of ideological signs, on the other hand, understanding subjects employ ideological signs they already know to the objects of discourse. This allows both ideological convergence and divergence.

Conceiving of understanding as an extension of the communicative act means recognizing the responsivity inherent to that process; that is, the one who understands faces the object of understanding. However, such orientation is not in respect to that which has been said, but also to that which will enter the chain of discursive communication.

[...] the utterance is related not only to preceding, but also to subsequent links in the chain of speech communion. When a speaker is creating an utterance, of course, these links do not exist. But from the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created. [...] From the very beginning, the speaker expects a response from them, an active responsive understanding. The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.94).²⁶

The response, in its turn, is the act-synthesis of understanding. The moment of response is only possible by means of processes of opposition from sign to sign, of comparison and orientation in respect to the apprehended object. Thus, responses derive from a dialogical synthesis that congregates ideological and axiological elements. According to Vološinov (1986, p.102),²⁷ “*Any true understanding is dialogic in nature [emphasis in original]*”. Response and understanding seek an *anti-word* to the speaker’s word. Bakhtin (1986, p.68)²⁸ also points that:

²⁵ For reference, see footnote 9.

²⁶ BAKHTIN, M. The Problem of Speech Genres. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp.60-102.

²⁷ For reference, see footnote 9.

²⁸ For reference, see footnote 25.

when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution and so on. [...] Any understanding of live speech, a live utterance, is inherently responsive, although the degree of this activity varies extremely. Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker.

In addition to a responsive process, understanding is a development of the communicative process as the response enters the chain of social communication and becomes an object of understanding. Consequently, the response promotes the continuation of the communicative act that will occur even if not immediately, because passive understanding is “an abstract aspect of the actual whole of actively responsive understanding” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.68).²⁹ For the Circle, the idea of passive understanding, that is, the production of meanings by subjects without demanding their position in respect to ideological signs, is an abstract moment and does not correspond to the real processes of understanding. Active understanding, on the other hand, “implies taking an active posture in relation to what is said and understood” (ZOOZOLI, 2012, p.257);³⁰ i.e., in active understanding the axiological positioning is essential and needs the subject’s action. According to Bakhtin (1981, p.281):³¹

A passive understanding of linguistic meaning is no understanding at all, it is only the abstract aspect of meaning. But even a mere concrete *passive* understanding of the speaker’s intention insofar as that understanding remains purely passive, purely receptive, contributes nothing new to the word under consideration, only mirroring it, seeking, at its most ambitious, merely the full reproduction of that which is already given in the word – even such an understanding never goes beyond the boundaries of the word’s context and in no way enriches the word [emphasis in original].

Passive understanding leaves:

the speaker in his own personal context, within his own boundaries;
such negative demands are completely immanent in the speaker’s own

²⁹ For reference, see footnote 25.

³⁰ ZOOZOLI, R. The Notion of Active Responsive Understanding in the Teaching and Learning Process. *Bakhtiniana*, São Paulo, v. 7, n. 1, pp.252-267, 2012. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S2176-45732012000100015>. Access on: 25 Feb. 2019.

³¹ BAKHTIN, M. Discourse in the Novel. In: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981. pp.259-422.

discourse and do not go beyond his semantic or expressive self-sufficiency.

In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement. [...] Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other (BAKHTIN, 1981, pp.281-282).³²

Therefore, through the axiological positioning, understanding might implicate ideological concordance or divergence. Overall, such possibilities are determined by the social classes and the concrete situations of production, except for the cases in which alienation subverts the interpretation of the real.

The following is an example in which the axiological positioning is evident in verbal interaction. The excerpt was taken from a teaching situation in a Physics class for high school first-year students.³³ The situation involved an experimental activity to problematize the free falling of objects. The experiment was exclusively by the teacher and observed by the students; it was executed in two stages: in the first one, the teacher dropped a book, and a sheet of paper (both with the same area), side by side, from a height of 1.5 meters. In the second one, the teacher placed the sheet of paper on the book and dropped them from the same height. During the activity, the teacher conducted the interaction with students, an example of which is presented in the following excerpt. The interaction occurred immediately after the teacher executed the first stage of the experiment, and the students explained that the observed fact was a result of the weight of the objects.

1	Teacher – So, thinking about the hypothesis that the book is heavier and that’s why it lands first, I’ll change one thing: instead of dropping the sheet in the air I’ll put the sheet on the book. What’s gonna happen?	The teacher places the sheet of paper on the book (their dimensions are the same).
2	João – The book falls and the sheet of paper stays.	
3	Teacher - How?	

³² For reference, see footnote 30.

³³ The research project was approved by the FCT/UNESP Ethics Committee (Project No. 305/2008). As the research procedures followed the resolutions of ethics in research with human beings, the names are fictional. More information on the teaching situation can be found in Lima (2010).

4	João - The book falls and the sheet stays...	The student moves his hand to symbolize the movement of the sheet of paper.
5	Teacher – The book lands first and the sheet of paper drops like this?	The Teacher does the same hand movement
6	João – Yeah	
7	Teacher – Let’s see?	
8	João – Sure.	
9	(...)	The Teacher drops the book with the sheet of paper on it.
10	Students - (laughter)	
11	Teacher – Did that happen?	
12	Antônio – No	
13	João – Teacher, is there any duct tape?	
14	Teacher – No, no duct tape, nothing. Wanna do it? Come here.	The teacher takes the sheet of paper and shows both sides to the students.
15	João – No	
...	...	Suppressed interactions to concentrate especially on the interaction between these subjects
	Teacher – So, first you told me what? That the book lands first because it’s heavier. Is it true?	
	João - No.	

Source: Lima (2010)

In the excerpt, a discursive production with verbal and non-verbal elements (experimental activity) is evident. The interaction is established predominantly by two subjects – the teacher and one of the students (João).

The axiological positioning is evident in shift 13, when the student expresses what he interpreted from the teacher’s activity. When he questions the presence of duct tape, the student orients himself skeptically towards the interpretation of the experiment; that is, he evaluates that understanding. The line in shift 13 can be considered an attempt to reinforce and retake the established orientation by the same student in shifts 2 and 4. Therefore, João (a student) tries to disqualify the visual interpretation of the activity by means of the alleged inclusion of an explanatory element (the duct tape), which, if confirmed, would validate the previous orientation established by the student. However, the teacher shows there is no tape, which induces the student to abandon the orientation he initially defended during the interaction.

The interaction above shows both the evaluative orientations and their change. At first, the student believed the book would drop faster because it was heavier than the

sheet; after the dialogue and the activity, there is a reformulation of this conception, which denotes another evaluative orientation (LIMA, 2010). Such change evinces the processual nature of understanding that is produced during the interaction between subjects and mediated by the ideological signs in the situation.

4 Every Understanding Is Based on Representation

Symbolic representation, that is, the ideal production of an object and its replacement by means of a symbolic expression, is central to the process of understanding, as this process necessarily lacks the internalization of meanings that represent a given object or idea. This consideration is more evident when the reflection focuses on the nature of the object of understanding.

The objects of understanding are predominantly social productions. Even when they are natural elements, human beings do not interact with them as purely organic or inorganic elements; rather, they do so from their numerous interpretations. The process of understanding takes place through the interaction of subjects; their interpretations interact, and stabilize the understanding of the object. This fact does not deny the physical limitations of the object; however, human beings have included these characteristics in their qualifications. Length, width, height are qualifiers created by the human being to describe dimensional characteristics of a given object. Ilyencov (2002 [1974])³⁴ contributes to this debate by highlighting the difference between knowledge and object: “One of these things is knowledge as contained in general formulas, instructions, and propositions, and the other thing is the unstructured chaos of phenomena as given in perception.” Saying that a box is 30 centimeters long is a descriptive representation of one its characteristics; however, the meaning expressed and the represented object are not the same. This is a process of abstraction of the characteristics of concrete objects followed by its expression through shared conventions. Thus, even the most trivial meanings on a given object have intrinsic elements of social production that aim to reach the correspondence between representation and object.

³⁴ ILYENKOV E. *Activity and Knowledge*. Translated by Peter Moxhay, 2002 [1974]. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/works/activity/index.htm>. Access on: 25 Feb. 2019.

Representations are established through ideological signs. The very process of abstraction does not occur in an abstract plan: it is coerced by the situations of production, thus being determined by the ideological signs. Therefore, the ideological signs influence the abstract process necessary for the production of representation and of expression as well as the interaction of the subject with what has been expressed and represented.

According to Vološinov (1986, p.11),³⁵

[...] understanding itself can come about only within some kind of semiotic material (e.g., inner speech), that sign bears upon sign, that *consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs* [emphasis in original].

Utterances aim to synthesize the meanings of a given object or its characteristics so they can be appreciated by someone else. Hence, in the utterance there is the representation of an object is followed by a process in which the other tries to understand the represented object. Consequently, understanding and uttering are interdependent processes; the process of understanding utterances yearns the other's utterance as well as the uttering subject yearns understanding.

The interlocutor, in their turn, is not inert in the process in which the speaker utters: they determine the forms of expressions as well as the relations between the signs established by the speaker. Vološinov (1986, p.86)³⁶ points out that “[...] *word is a two-sided act*. It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and *for whom* it is meant. As word, it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between the speaker and the listener* [...] [emphasis in original].” In addition, “the utterance at the same time that is constituted in the correlations with the ‘already said’ is also oriented by the response to what has not yet been produced” (LIMA; GIORDAN, 2017).³⁷

Understanding, then, takes place amidst a dialectical and dialogical process of production of meaning in which all subjects who participate in the communicative process establish particular ways of understanding the discursive object. It is dialectic because it involves a progressive movement based on the counter-position of meanings aiming at a

³⁵ For reference, see footnote 9.

³⁶ For reference, see footnote 9.

³⁷ In the original: “o enunciado, ao mesmo tempo em que é constituído nas correlações com os ‘já ditos’, é também orientado pelas respostas que ainda não foram produzidas.”

synthesis that expresses the meaning produced. It is also dialogical because the very understanding enters the chain of social communication in active response to utterances and fostering new responses. The development of the dialogue promotes an evolutive process of understanding in which the new elements brought into the communicative interaction corroborate the rigor, precision, and accuracy of the understanding.

Hence, understanding is always bound to a dialectical relation between the subjects involved in a communicative process. Understanding depends on the subjects' capacity of expression as well as the capacity of "opposing sign to sign," especially because during the process of understanding the listener becomes the speaker and vice-versa. The shift of position between subjects during communication allows understanding to be re-elaborated and redefined by participants, indicating that the process is continuous and established amidst social relations. Therefore, understanding is not a process that occurs exclusively in the consciousness of subjects who understand, but in social settings in which meanings are negotiated by participants in the communicative process. We highlight that it is essential to consider that the positions of subjects in communicative processes vary constantly, so the listener becomes the speaker and vice-versa: the more intense and continuous the shift of positions, the greater the probability to develop understanding of the object.

At least two subjects participate in the process of understanding; hence, some sort of interaction exists between them. The interaction between subjects is doubly measured, that is, it depends both on the utterance and the apprehended object. Therefore, relations between the subjects take place through the utterance and the object, which have a representational relation; that is, the utterance aims at representing the object.

From a historical materialist interpretation, the origin of the process is in the object that is apprehended by the subject (speaker).³⁸ Next, there is a process of expressive production in which the speaker produces an utterance for the interlocutor to interpret that which is represented. As the expression materializes, the interlocutor realizes several associative, dissociative and comparative processes with the signs during the interpretation. This allows the listener to produce the object socially, that is, they start to recognize the object according to its social functions, systematized characteristics,

³⁸ Before a given communicative interaction, the speaker might have been through several processes of understanding by means of cultural transmission, scientific development, experience with the object, etc.

judgment of value, etc. All these processes – interpretation, expression and social production – are developed by means of ideological signs that determine the degrees of understanding and social (re)production of the object. The synthesis of understanding through response promotes the shift in the subjects' positions, so the listener becomes the speaker and is able to insert new elements in the process.

Notably, understanding depends on the articulation of elements and meanings known by the subject to mobilize those which they are in the process of understanding. As Vološinov points out:

The understanding of a sign is, after all, an act of reference between the sign apprehended and other, already known signs; in other words, understanding is a response to a sign with signs. And this chain of ideological creativity and understanding, moving from sign to sign and then to a new sign, is perfectly consistent and continuous: from one link of a semiotic nature (hence, also of a material nature) we proceed uninterruptedly to another link of exactly the same nature. And nowhere is there a break in the chain, nowhere does the chain plunge into inner being, nonmaterial in nature and unembodied in signs (1986, p.11).³⁹

Consequently, understanding can only be reached as the subjects who understand are able to dislocate the ideological signs to relate to one another, making new meanings that are oriented towards the object.

No cultural sign once taken in and given meaning, remains in isolation: it becomes part of the *unity of the verbally constituted consciousness*. It is in the capacity of the consciousness to find verbal access to it. Thus, as it were, spreading ripples of verbal responses and resonances form around each and every ideological sign. Every *ideological refraction of existence in process of generation*, no matter what the nature of its significant material, *is accompanied by ideological refraction in word* as an obligatory concomitant phenomenon. Word is present in each and every act of understanding and in each and every act of interpretation (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.15; emphasis in original).⁴⁰

Therefore, representative aspects indicate the responsive position of subjects who understand, once the very decoding of uttered meanings lacks interactions with other ideological signs. As a consequence, understanding takes place during an interaction, a

39 For reference, see footnote 9.

40 For reference, see footnote 9.

moment in which the represented object is accompanied by the responsiveness of those who interact and represent – a fact that fosters the continuation of the communicative act.

Final Considerations

This article proposed to synthesize the concept of understanding used by Bakhtin and the Circle. The concept has been used in investigations in the field of education and aims to contribute to the debate on educational processes. The article determined four essential aspects of the process of understanding: ideological, axiological, communicative, and representative.

The aspects highlighted in the present work hint at the responsive dimension of understanding, as articulated by Zozzoli (2012, p.268),⁴¹ who reaffirms the opposition against “the abstract and passive description of language”. Instead, she defends “dialogue, active responsive understanding and attitude.”

All these aspects are indissociable from the concrete situations of utterance production, indicating the particularity of the process of understanding, as inevitably and always singular, and unrepeatable. Matusov (2015, p.397) highlights:

A repeated message even gets a new meaning from being “repeated” and “revoiced” among other possible meanings (e.g. consider a court battle for original patents and copyright). Bakhtin argued that in the meanings of two messages, anything that looks “the same” is not actually the same on close investigation.

These differences in a repeated message can be understood due to changes in the concrete conditions of utterance production and discursive understanding. By listening to a repeated utterance, the axiological position of the subject who understands will always be different from their first axiological position. Communicative and representative contexts will be different. In fact, subjects may even have associated new ideological signs during the repetition.

41 For reference, see footnote 29.

Finally, based on the present reflections the impossible neutrality in the process of understanding is evident, as it requires, from the subject, a position that is ideological, axiological and semantic.

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