# Discursive Acts

## Language, Signs, and Selves

Robert S. Perinbanayagam

Revised second edition

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**Robert S. Perinbanayagam**

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To the many in the University of Minnesota in the early sixties, both colleagues and teachers, who, with their various acts of kindness and consideration, made my life there both intellectually stimulating and emotionally fulfilling.

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“Language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well.”

—Mikhail Bakhtin

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# Preface

This volume is a revised version of my earlier work, *Discursive Acts*. Various sections of the work have been overhauled systematically, new sections added in place of others, and some infelicities and obscurities, I hope, have been removed. In truth I set out to make some slight changes in the book and have it republished, but the more I got into it the more convinced I became that a major overhaul was needed. The result is almost a new work

In the following pages I attempt to relate various recent theories of language and discourse to earlier theories of signs and selves to produce a description of the structures and processes of conversations in everyday life and their consequences to the human agent. These conversations constitute the procedures by which selves are given shape and substance. Conversations lead to the emergence of selves, and selves in turn create conversations. In and through reciprocal conversations, two selves reveal what each wants to be taken as: together they not only find each other, but themselves as well.

In analyzing conversations I have sought to use the strengths and insights of various classical and contemporary theorists rather than dwelling at length on their limitations and weaknesses. In the Tamil poem *Naladiyar* (verse: 135), I have read of a mythical bird that, if it is offered milk mixed with dross in a cup, will be able selectively to drink the milk and leave the rest behind. The poet argues that people of learning should be able to do the same: separate the milk of knowledge from the dross. The poem goes this way:

> Knowledge has no boundaries
> The days for those who study are but few
> Hence do learn with discernment that which is befitting,
> Like the bird that drinks the milk separating the dross from it

This, of course, will create another hermeneutic problem, as Norman Denzin has pointed out, because what one interpreter considers milk

may be another's dross—even poison! Nevertheless, this approach can be very useful in dealing with social theory because there is no theory about human agents, insofar as it is produced by other agents, that will not prove to be erroneous on some points and correct on others. Therefore, I have used a number of them in developing my own synthetic theory of signifying acts constructed by the management and control of language, and tried to delineate the various consequences thereof. This has led me to a notion of discourse as an interactional act capable of containing multiple significations, all of them delineating a self and an other in varying forms of dialogues and relationships. Instead of considering the differences between the various relevant schools of thought, I have sought to think of the various ways in which signs, symbols, codes, discourses, grammar, sounds and logic are put to *use* in the everyday life of human agents.

The theories of language and meaning I have used have been subject to vigorous critiques in recent years. The work of the structuralists has been subject to a particularly sustained attack, as some of structuralism's early advocates have withdrawn their support, or produced their own *aufhebung* in deconstructionism. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the essential points of the structuralist claims are irrefutable, because the discursive strategies that even the most determined critics use in their own texts reveal the presence of all the structuralist categories! Like Monsieur Jourdain in Moliere's play, they will find that not only are they producing prose but a prose that is subject to structuralist formality. Of course, there is a great deal in structuralism that needs to be challenged and replaced. But for all that, as an analytic description of the human symbolic product it has its strengths, particularly when supplemented by the thought of those who came after it and who stood on its shoulders. In any case, theories should not be treated as commodities demanding fetishistic loyalties or as religions demanding devotion but as incomplete programs forever demanding critique and development.

In many ways the work presented here parallels that of work done under other rubrics—sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and ethnomethodology. This work, however, is not an attempt to supersede that done under the influence of these other perspectives, but presents the same matter from a different standpoint. That is to say, ethnomethodology and sociolinguistics focus on certain *formal* properties of conversations, and they have pursued the quest for these properties with great methodological rigor, while eschewing questions about intentions attitudes and emotions. In their work, as in that of many

structuralists, discourse has become *depersonalized*, with the linguistic form itself becoming an autonomous entity hermetically sealed from the world of selves, and their loves and passions, their angers and hatreds, their conflicts and sufferings. My own interest is in displaying the *dialogic* properties of such discourses, conceiving each element in them as pragmatic and directed. The dialogue that results from the artful management of discursive acts intertwines various selves and constitutes moments in the career of these selves. Nevertheless, I have benefited from the work of these scholars, undoubtedly harvested, like tea, with delicate hands and I recognize that it was they who opened the field for inquiry and pointed the way for others. Tea however needs to be processed in several stages after being picked to eventually become a good brew!

In this work, G.H. Mead's work on conversations as social acts becomes a starting point, followed by Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of dialogues and speech genres. The work of many linguists on grammar and many literary theories on style and form, too, become resources for my theory of discursive acts. From Mead's work I derive the idea of *conversationality,* and from Bahktin, *dialogicality*, and from the linguists *grammaticality* and *phoneticity* and from Kenneth Burke *rhetoricality*—to coin a few words.

These features occur in the acts of discourse that human agents produce in the course of their everyday interactions, and a systematic examination of the texts that they produce will reveal their presence. These features of discursive acts are, however, neither neutral presences in these acts, nor are they irrelevant in the construction of human selves, interactions and relationships. Far from this being the case, these features—conversationality, dialogicality, grammaticality and rhetoricality—are instrumentations with which *intentionalities* of an agent are communicated. My recourse here is to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce: intentionalities are articulated by the use of signs of various kinds and valences leading to a claim of semiosis as an activity undertaken in many complex processes of transformation. The seminal ideas of Peirce are present in this work, often directly and in other places as ghostly subtexts. Conversationality, dialogicality, grammaticality and rhetoricality are used, then, to construct a self, as well as to conduct everyday interactions. These processes work *isomorphically* in the production of discursive acts in which intentions are announced in order to obtain particular interpretations.

While a continuing thread runs through the entire work, each chapter examines an independent issue in the production and processing of dis-

cursive acts, and works of authors cited in one chapter and their words may appear again in another chapter to make my points more readily. I trust that this will not prove too wearisome. I have been writing on the issues raised in these pages for some time now and some unavoidable echoes from my earlier publications will be heard here too.

I have, for the most part, used published versions of actual conversations to illustrate my thesis. In addition, I have also used a few pieces of conversations that I had collected on my own and recorded as soon as they occurred. These are cited as "field notes." I have also used the recordings made at an office in New York City. I have deliberately sought to use the most ordinary of conversations to make my case. Since on occasion I cite the work of great poets, and various major theorists frequently, this exercise can be described as a descent from the sublime to the very ordinary!

The first incarnation of this work elicited favorable comments from all reviewers except for one trivial one and another tendentious one. Among the favorable ones I was struck by the comments of John Heritage in the *American Journal of Sociology* and John Manzo in *Social Forces*: Heritage referred to the "allusive" nature of my approach and Manzo referred to my style as "challenging" and said that it would prevent my readers from appreciating the work fully. I have tried to make the work less allusive—that is, spelling out the details of my arguments more fully and this, I hope, will make it less challenging! In any case, I hope the work keeps the convesation going which is the main thing—in life as in literature.

I must thank David Maines, Doyle McCarthy and Marvin Scott for having read some chapters of this work and giving me valuable comments. Nalayini Amarsingham Fernando, Terry McCarthy and Andrea Diamond converted my handwritten documents into typescript—no doubt an arduous task,and I am truly grateful to them. Judy Frost read, and edited the manuscript with exemplary dedication and skill, and gave me valuable comments and I am extremely grateful to her.

# 1

# Prologue

In the series of stories known as “Tales from the Thousand and One Nights,” Scheherazade finds herself in a peculiar predicament. The king of Persia, disillusioned by the disloyalty of his queen, has decided to love only virgins. Each will spend a night with him, only to be beheaded in the morning. Scheherazade is determined to avoid this fate: “When the king had taken the maiden to his chamber and had lain with her, she wept and said: I have a young sister to whom I wish to bid farewell” (Dawood, 1973: 22-23).

The king sent for the sister, Dunyazad. When she arrived, she threw her arms around Scheherazade’s neck and then seated herself by her side. Then Dunyazad said to Scheherazade: “Tell me sister, a tale or marvel, so that the night may pass pleasantly. Gladly, she answered, if the king permits. And the king, who was troubled by sleeplessness, eagerly listened to the tale of Scheherazade” (Dawood, 1973: 23).

Listening to a tale that turned out to be endless, the king became so preoccupied with the stories Scheherazade spun that she was saved from a beheading. Indeed, besides avoiding her fate, she got the king to have two children by her. Scheherazade’s discourse begins with one story whose characters want to tell a story of their own, a story that contains characters who have their own stories to tell. This sets up a discursive braid that leads on and on, with both the teller and the listener engrossed in the story, and the story within a story, and the story within it…. But there is really only one story, the one a self tells another as they go through life. The story, or as it will be called here, the discourse, if not all, is what we convert all into. The human being is blessed, or cursed as the case may be, with language and uses it to occupy his or her mind as well as to conduct his or her relationships with others. The stories he or she tells

others, he or she tells himself or herself, and the stories he tells himself or herself only, constitute the sum and substance of a life. The stories that are told and retold, sad ones or happy ones, complete or incomplete lones, about how to do something or about what happened to us today, about what we expect from the other, from life, and after life, let others enter and so know our minds.

Several hundred years after Scheherazade, the German playwright Peter Handke (1973) investigated the significance of sentences with which you can tell yourself a story, claiming that they defined as well as imprisoned him (1973: 68). The play is *Kaspar*, and it is the story of the emergence of language and selfhood in a child raised in isolation until he was seventeen. At the beginning of the play he is physically uncoordinated and frightened and capable of uttering only a single sentence. Near the end of the play he is able to say:

> Once plagued by sentences,
> I now can't have enough of sentences.
> Once haunted by words, I now play with every single letter.
>
> (Handke, 1973: 111)

The play attempts to show how this is achieved, how a languageless entity is socialized into a human identity. But Handke also manages to convey the impression that this is a rather dubious achievement, viewing the acquisition of language and selfhood as both a trap and a gift.

In the opening scene, Kaspar Hauser knows only one sentence that he keeps repeating. The sentence is, "I want to be a person like somebody else was once," (1973: 72) and it is this sentence that is repeated in this form and in slightly altered forms throughout the rest of the play, becoming embedded in longer units, ending inside a climactic speech of several sentences. Each dramatic sequence in the play conveys a differing significance to the acquisition of more and more elaborate speech and in a dramaturgic tour de force manages to communicate by these same sentences the deep irony and ambiguity involved in the acquisition of language and hence meaning, culture and humanity. These sequences, analogous to scenes in a play, are described by Handke as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Phase I: | Can Kaspar, the owner of one sentence, begin, and begin to do something with this sentence? |
| Phase II: | Can Kaspar do something against other sentences with his sentence? |
| Phase III: | Can Kaspar at least hold his own against other sentences with his sentence? |
| Phase IV: | Can Kaspar defend himself from other sentences and keep quiet even though other sentences prod him to speak? |

Phase V: Can Kaspar only become aware of what he speaks through speaking?
Phase VI: Can Kaspar, the owner of sentences, do something with these sentences, not only to other sentences but also to the object of other sentences?
Phase VII: Can Kaspar bring himself into order with sentences about order, or rather with ordered sentences?
Phase VIII: Can Kaspar, from the order of a single sentence, derive a whole series of sentences, a series that represent a comprehensive order?
Phase IX: Can Kaspar learn what in each sentence is the model upon which an infinite number of sentences about order can be based?
Phase X: Can Kaspar, with the sentence model he has learned, make the object accessible to himself or become himself accessible to the objects?
Phase XI: Can Kaspar by means of sentences make his contribution to the great community of sentences?
Phase XII: Can Kaspar be brought to the point where, with rhyming sentences, he will find rhyme and reasons in the object?
Phase XIII: Can Kaspar put questions to himself?
Phase XIV: Can Kaspar, with uninhibited sentences which he applies to his old inhibited sentences, reverse the inverted world of these sentences?
Phase XV: Can Kaspar defend himself at least with an inverted world of sentences against inverted sentences about the world? Or: Can Kaspar, by inverting sentences at least avoid the false appearance of rightness?
Phase XVI: Who is Kaspar now? Kaspar, who is now Kaspar? What is now Kaspar? What is now Kaspar? Kaspar?

(Handke, 1973: 55-56)

In the final speech, now that Kaspar has learned to speak and to speak in fact rather voluminously, the question that occurs to Handke then is about Kaspar's identity. Now that he has become fully human, he asks "Who is Kaspar now? Kaspar, who is now Kaspar? What is now Kaspar? What is now Kaspar? Kaspar?" The acquisition of a language and humanity does not indeed solve anything: the very fact of such acquisition creates problems that cannot be solved as readily as the problems created by a lack of language. The learning process itself is described by Handke, as "speech torture," and the entire staging of the play, in versions that I have seen, emphasizes Handke's conviction that this is an achievement of dubious merit: a disarranged and forbidding-looking stage and a cyclopean eye of a light, which suggests various lights used in getting confessions out of unwilling captives, are the background in which Kaspar is taught to speak. Kaspar comes on stage awkwardly, barely able to coordinate his limbs, displaying an air of astonishment. His clothes are awry and their colors clash with the colors on stage. When he begins to move, he is seen to be very mechanical and "artificial" in his gestures. When he speaks, he utters again and again the single sentence quoted earlier. When he sits down, he finds he is unable

to get up again with any ease. When he does finally manage to get up and walk, he goes about muttering his sentence and touching objects on the stage. But he is unable to react to the things he touches because they have no meaning for him. That is, he wanders around aimlessly in a world without significance because the objects in that world have not yet been named for him. He then stops his movements, going to sit on a sofa as voices begin to be heard all around him. Someone else has taken matters in hand, and he, she, or they are going to teach him to speak. The play then begins to take verbal shape, with offstage prompters addressing various passages, themselves big with significance to Kaspar. Witness this passage, the prompter's opening gambit: "You have a sentence with which you can tell yourself everything that you can't tell others. You have a sentence with which you can already contradict the same sentence" (1973: 67). Later on in the same phase of the play, Kaspar is told by the prompters: "With the sentence, you can pretend to be dumbfounded. Assert yourself with the sentence against other sentences. Name everything that comes in your way and move it out of your way. Familiarize yourself with all objects" (1973: 68). And on it goes. The power of language, its essential properties and functions, its "possibilities" as Handke might put it, are described in the very exercise by which Kaspar is being taught to speak, but with a consistent undertone of irony. The social-psychological functions of language are as evident to Handke as the structural and sociological ones. Witness the following: "You can hear yourself. You become aware. You become aware of yourself" (1973: 70), and later on he has the prompters say to Kaspar, "and you learn with the sentence that there is an order and you learn with the sentence to learn order" (1973: 71). In the hands of the playwright, the story's implications for discourse, interaction, and consciousness are presented clearly and concisely, albeit in a poetic rhythm and diction. In sum, Handke's play forcefully poses the questions that most concern students of human linguistic interactions.

Stories and sentences, however well-formed as they are told and heard, provide the matter that creates interpersonal presence and interactional resonance and engagement. They make the days of life proceed apace with a minimum of anguish and ennui, proceed without thought of murder, as in Scheherazade's case, or even suicide, for a while at least. And like Scheherazade's stories, all discourses are embedded in other discourses through which we make ourselves and our worlds. Kaspar entered a dialogue and imprisoned himself while Scheherazade created one and saved herself. Kenneth Burke put this predicament that human agents

face in a prophetic vein when he wrote, “In this staggering disproportion between man and no-man, there is no place for purely human boasts of grandeur, or for forgetting that men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss” (1984: 272). Talk, listen, nervously or otherwise, and build a culture, local or general, and get through the day and a life.

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# 2

# Discursive Processes and the Dialogic Self

Everyone, after all, is born into solitary confinement and, like Kaspar and Scheherazade, manages to survive by conducting discourses with whoever else may be around. A life then becomes a discourse, and discourse itself has a life of its own, embedded though it may be in the lives of people. “The life of a human being does not consist merely in the sphere of goal-directed verbs. It does not consist merely of activities that have something for their object. I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. The life of a human being does not consist merely of all this and its like. All this, and its like, is the basis of the realm of *It*. But the realm of *You* has another basis,” wrote Buber (1970: 54), and for him, “Whoever says You stands in relation, in a dialogue” and “All actual life is an encounter” 1970: 62), and “In the beginning is the relation” (1970: 69). It is out of such meetings and relationships that a self emerges and is sustained—indeed lives. It is in such ongoing interactions that one makes contact with a world and meshes with others. In the course of these interactions, the self of each participant addresses the other and such discourses become the signifying medium in which the self occurs. Such a self is not just there, nor is it a being that is there. Rather, the self is variable and reflective, nuanced and shaded, and, as an object to itself and to others, scintillates and reverberates in varying waves and beats and is forever responsive to the signifying stimulation of the environs, people and things, the things people say, and the things that things say. The self needs this signifying culture in which to exist and thrive, and it is in it that it assumes its reality and exhibits its varying colors and shapes.

Buber himself says, “Signs happen to us without respite, living means being addressed, we would need only to present ourselves and to perceive” (1972: 10). But the addresses “come in such alternating cascades

that many build armors against them. Each of us is encased in an armor whose task is to ward off signs" (1972: 10). These signs are also interpreted and used to sustain the self and present a self and these cascades of addresses need to be differentiated into elements and examined for their signifying qualities. The interactional process is then an engagement between mutually present—in the same locale or not—social objects that seek not only self understanding, but an understanding of the other, by undertaking dialogues with others. These dialogues are conducted by using a variety of complex instrumentations, each of them having different uses and varying impacts on the emerging and emergent self.[1]

## The Dialogic Process

It appears in fact that dialogism is embedded in the brain itself. Recent developments in the field of neuroscience and its derivative "social neurology" have resulted in some discoveries that are of great interest to interactionist social psychology.

The founding father of the interactionist perspective is nearly always taken to be G.H. Mead. In doing this, the fact that Mead's work was influenced by, and was in fact embedded in the work of the other pragmatists, is often overlooked. In recent years, some scholars have tried to connect Mead's work to that of Charles Sanders Peirce (Rochberg-Halton, 1986; Wiley, 2006; Halton, 1995). The time has come to connect the interactionist perspective to the other pragmatist, William James (though Peirce exiled him from the circle) who, after all, wrote a monumental book on the principles of psychology. In this work published in 1890, James wrote:

> A science of the mind must reduce the complexities of behavior to their elements. A science of the brain must point out the functions of its elements. A science of the relations of the mind and the brain must show how the elementary ingredients of the former correspond to the elementary functions of the latter (1890: 28).

It was not, of course, possible to study the occurrences in the brain when James wrote this. Now, however, it is possible to examine the processes of brain functioning by means of an instrumentation known as brain scanning. The emergence of neuroscience as a discipline has accelerated in recent years with the availability of sophisticated imaging techniques. One upshot of these developments is the concomitant emergence of "social neuroscience."

These scans record the flow of blood in different sectors of the brain corresponding to the person's experiences, including perception of verbal

symbols. That is, these scans record the flow of blood in different sectors of the brain as various symbolic interactions occur.

Consider here, for instance, studies reported by Mitchell, Mason, Macrae and Banaji. They conclude that their data suggest "that activity in some brain regions such as the medial PFC specifically subserves social cognitive representations about specific aspects of other people including their mental and behavioral characteristics" (2006: 69).

Other studies reported by the same authors involved verbal stories, cartoons, competitive games, etc. "Despite the wide diversity of tasks used to prompt neural states … a remarkable empirical consensus has emerged regarding the underlying brain regions important for understanding the mind of another person" (Mitchell, et al. 2006: 69). The most striking finding here is that when subjects were asked to infer the neural state of another person, a different and specialized part of the brain was involved. That is to say, different neural networks were used to cognize human agents as opposed to non-human ones.

The significant point about these findings regarding human interactions is that the observable reactions in the brain were often activated by the addressing of words to a subject. The subject hears the words, submits them to an immediate or simultaneous act of interpretation and such interpretations are reflected in the brain.

Interaction processes as such are then inescapable in the life of a human agent: to be alive and attentive is to be also interactive with animate and inanimate objects on a continuous basis. There is a further issue here: the words that were addressed to the subjects even in this experiment were never neutral ones. They carried at least some modicum of emotionality. The mirror neurons, as they are called, are able, in Daniel Goleman's summary of the research:

> …to track the emotional flow, movement and even the *intentions* of the person we are with, and replicate this sensed state in our own brain by stirring in our brain the same areas active in the other person (Goleman NYT 10/10/2006; emphasis added).

If they are able to do that—that is replicate the other's emotions and ideas in one's own brain—what effect will such mirroring of a continuity of emotions for a sufficiently long period of time have on the brain? Will it leave some permanent markers? Instead of the emotions of love, if we take anger, hate, rejection, exclusion, etc. and allow such emotions to be directed at another person for some time, this person will be able not only to feel these emotions cognitively and conceptually but also neurologically: they are registered in the brain. The question

of interest here is: how permanent is the registration and does it have residual effects? *It is surely a plausible claim that continuous symbolic and emotional interactions will not only shape the self by themselves in the moment but will also shape it into habitual patterns of knowledge about itself and presentations thereof.* In other words, the dialogicity of the human agent, his or her embeddedness in each other, symbolically and emotionally, is an inescapable fact—indeed an imperative condition of the human species. These studies give strong support to the philosophical analysis and social psychological speculations about communication, conversation and the self that G.H. Mead made more than seventy-five years ago.[2]

## Conversations: G.H. Mead

The central metaphor in Mead's works is not the game or play, as is often assumed, but "conversation." Throughout his many essays, one finds the notion of conversation appearing strategically to indicate the interactive nature of human experiences. To begin with there is the "conversation of gestures ... just the glance of an eye, the attitude of the body, which leads to the response…. Conversations in gestures may be carried out which cannot be translated into speech" (1934: 14). This type of conversation was to play an important role in the work of Erving Goffman (1959; 1963). The dramaturgical theory of interaction that Goffman developed is in effect an extension and elaboration of the dialogic processes described by Mead. Mead takes up this type of conversation later to indicate the interactively responsive process through which meaning emerges: "Let us go back to the conversation of gestures in the dog-fight. There the stimulus which one dog gets from another is to a response which is different from the response of the stimulating form." In this example as dogs engage in wordless conversations, but for the humans this is a precursor or an accompaniment of verbal conversations. From this use of the conversation of gestures, he goes on to discuss vocal gestures in conversations: "In the case of the vocal gesture, the form hears its own stimulus just as when this is used by other forms, so it tends to respond also to its own stimulus as it responds to the stimulus of other forms" (1934: 65). This progress from physical gestures to vocal gestures that are heard by the user and the respondent locks them into an interaction and leads Mead to enunciate his famous statement about meaning: "The meaning of what we are saying is the tendency to respond to it," and later on he gives an extended statement, with the same import, about a significant symbol: "It is, of