

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Arguments About “Dialogue” In Practice And Theory



This paper examines arguments appealing to a normative concept of “dialogue” in discourse samples drawn from newspapers, websites and other sources. The analysis identifies normative assumptions that are involved when “dialogue” is used as grounds for assessing, advocating, or opposing some action, or when arguing that dialogue in a relevant sense has certain requirements or that it is a good, necessary, impossible, or bad way to communicate with some particular others or in some type of situation. Having provided an exploratory description of assumptions about “dialogue” in ordinary metadiscourse (practical discourse about discourse), the paper concludes by reflecting briefly on these practical arguments about dialogue from the standpoint of dialogue theory.

1. *Dialogue as a Practical and Theoretical Concept*

The English word “dialogue” has several distinct senses. This paper is concerned with dialogue understood as a normative way for people to communicate with others who are different, a sense in which we can speak of dialogue as occurring, or failing to occur, between nations, ethnic or religious groups, or individuals. This sense of dialogue “represents a common contemporary European concept” that emerged only in the mid-twentieth century (post-World War II) and is perhaps “particularly salient in English, not only in the political and religious contexts but also in many other domains – social, cultural, scientific, etc.” (Wierzbicka 2005, pp.7-8). This specific concept of dialogue has no equivalent in many other world languages but has been spreading globally with the use of English as a lingua franca.

According to Wierzbicka’s corpus-based semantic analysis, this sense of dialogue refers to a process of reciprocal communication that occurs in a series of episodes over an extended period of time. Participants in dialogue are aware of their differences and are motivated to seek mutual understanding and common ground but not necessarily full agreement or rapprochement. Their attitudes are characterized by mutual respect, good will, and openness to change. Dialogue

“usually involves groups of people (or people representing such groups) rather than private individuals,” and the term inherently implies a positive evaluation, the “assumption that interaction of this kind can be valuable (constructive, productive, etc.), that is, that it can lead to something good” (Wierzbicka 2005, p. 6). But, Wierzbicka notes,

“It is not, however, uniformly valued; there are also those who fear that “dialogue” may take the place of genuine discussion and healthy argument, that it may be used to promote relativism and to discourage a search for truth or that it may pursue a perceived need for harmony that is in reality false and phoney rather than based on truth.” (p. 20)

Wierzbicka contrasts this ordinary concept with currently prominent theoretical concepts of dialogue such as those attributed to Martin Buber and (mistakenly, she claims) to Mikhail Bakhtin:

“Given the great expectations linked with the word *dialogue* in many philosophical and psychological writings on human relations and the human condition, it is important to recognize that dialogue in the sense explicated here is a relatively modest ideal, which does not imply anything like Bakhtin’s “interpersonal communion” or Buber’s “I - thou” relationship. It does not imply closeness, intimacy, “heart-to-heart” communication, or even complete frankness and openness. It implies that each party makes a step in the direction of the other, not that they reach a shared position or even mutual warm feelings. It does not imply full mutual understanding or a closeness which no longer requires words.” (p. 21)

Wierzbicka appears to assume that these theoretical concepts of dialogue have little or no practical importance, an assumption I do not share. Pointing out that “the meanings of words are social facts which cannot be changed at will by individuals, no matter how prominent,” she goes on to argue, “Philosophers can of course use words in idiosyncratic and metaphorical ways (and they often do), but such use has usually little if any impact on the meanings which are shared by whole speech communities” (p. 22). While this is undoubtedly true as a generalization about the resistance of natural languages to intentional change, it does not warrant the assumption that theoretical debates about dialogue have no potential to influence linguistic-communicative practices in society.

True, individual theorists are seldom able to influence society “at will.” In a broader view, however, ideas that become prominent in academic and intellectual

discourse do sometimes circulate through society and influence everyday concepts and practices. Theoretical concepts that are relevant to practical concerns can be used in practical metadiscourse. For example, some educated ordinary speakers are able to criticize fallacies in others' arguments, using the technical language of argumentation theory for practical purposes. The potential for this kind of transference from theoretical to practical metadiscourse seems especially strong in the case of a communication-related concept like dialogue, because communication is a topic about which there is considerable public interest and a growing demand for "expert" knowledge (Cameron 2000).

The inherent reflexivity of language-in-use implies a potential for theoretical and practical ideas about communication to interact. The goal of a "practical" communication theory is to exploit this potential by engaging theoretical reflection with practical concerns and normative ideas found in ordinary metadiscourse (Craig 1996, 1999, 2005, 2006). Metadiscourse encodes normative, ideological beliefs about language and communication (Jaworski et al. 2004; Taylor 1997; Verschueren 1999). Wierzbicka's analysis illustrates this point by showing that dialogue (in the sense she discusses) "embodies a certain social ideal" of good communication (p. 22). This normative ideal is not only implicit in everyday uses of the word, it can be advocated explicitly by proponents of dialogue or criticized, as Wierzbicka points out, by those who argue that dialogue promotes relativism or inhibits healthy controversy. Wierzbicka herself participates in this metadiscursive debate by commenting, "there can be great value in dialogue" even though "it can be used as a tool of manipulation, propaganda, or pseudo-communication" (pp. 20-21).

Recent work in the ethnography of communication lends further support to the approach I am advancing. Carbaugh (2005) defends the assumption that ethnographic interpretation can engage with the reflexivity inherent to cultural practices of communication (see p. 6). Katriel (2004) writes, in the introduction to her profound study of dialogue in Israeli culture, "the Israeli quest for authentic dialogue has its roots in ideological and philosophical trends that flourished in Europe in the first part of the twentieth century and became part of mainstream scholarly writings in the second part" (2004, p. 2). These studies suggest that philosophical writings on dialogue and communication should not be assumed irrelevant to ordinary cultural meanings.

Commonplace assumptions about dialogue embedded in ordinary metadiscourse, having been explicitly articulated by scholars, can enter the general intellectual

debate where they can become objects of theoretical explication, critique, and revision. Members of the lay public (including students in university courses) who attend to these intellectual debates can be influenced to think and talk differently about dialogue and to espouse different normative ideals, which may or may not continue to diffuse more widely through society. This is not a process that anyone can actually control, but it is a process in which anyone can participate with more or less reflective intentionality and theoretical sophistication (Craig 1996). Arguments about dialogue in practical metadiscourse thus have proto-theoretical content and carry the potential both to inform and to be informed by intellectual theories of dialogue.

2. Purpose and Method

This research does not address a technical problem in linguistics or argumentation theory. It is an exploratory, descriptive study of arguments found in unsystematically gathered samples of contemporary public discourse about “dialogue.” I examine claims and assumptions about dialogue and how they are used pragmatically in the discourse samples. My purpose, as explained in the previous section, is to make these practical ideas about dialogue available for analysis and critique by communication theorists, thus contributing to a much-needed dialogue between dialogue theory and praxis.

For this exploratory study, I collected about 50 English language discourse samples over a period of several months in 2005-2006. Along with a few examples encountered accidentally in my daily reading, most were found by using the Google.com and LexisNexis search engines. I did not follow a systematic sampling plan but experimented with various keyword combinations and phrases including the word “dialogue” and browsed the search results for relevant examples (i.e., texts presenting any normative argument about dialogue in a relevant sense). The search word “dialogue” by itself yielded many hits (hundreds on LexisNexis in a six-month time frame, hundreds of millions on Google) but with relatively few usable examples. I also used narrower searches to explore particular themes, such as: “dialogue is needed” (or “... necessary”); “dialogue is impossible” (or “... not possible”); “our dialogue”; “dialogue with my”; “no dialogue”; “seek dialogue”, and “‘diplomacy has failed’ AND dialogue”. These narrower searches tended to be more fruitful.

3. Results

My study of arguments about dialogue in the discourse samples found a rich array

of argumentative premises and assumptions not yet fully analyzed and too numerous to report in detail in this initial paper. The following subsections present selected results focusing on: (3.1) the range of relevant uses of the term dialogue in comparison to the semantic analysis reported by Wierzbicka (2005); (3.2) argumentative themes that seem to characterize distinct domains of political/international, inter-group/societal, and individual dialogue; and (3.3) themes that occur similarly across domains.

Although I note certain gross patterns of relative frequency and association among themes in my discourse samples, these are only rough qualitative estimates, not based on systematic sampling, coding, or statistical procedures. Qualitative descriptions of the arguments identified in the discourse samples are more securely grounded in the data.

3.1 *Comparison to Wierzbicka (2005)*

Uses of the term dialogue in my discourse samples were generally consistent with Wierzbicka's (2005) semantic analysis, but with at least four qualifications.

First, dialogue most commonly referred to an open-ended process that might occur in episodes over a span of time; however, dialogue also sometimes referred to a single episode that might or might not occur as part of a continuing dialogue, as in the following example:

1. "Watching the recent dialogue between young Singaporeans and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, I came away with mixed feelings." (Jueh 2006)

Wierzbicka (2005) regards these as two distinct senses of dialogue (discrete episode versus relationship over time). However, I found no noticeable difference in argumentative themes associated with the two senses.

Second, the most frequent contexts of dialogue in my discourse samples were political (especially international), and inter-group or societal (including inter-faith religious dialogue and, most prominently, dialogue between Muslims and other groups within Western societies, a reflection of current events at the time of this study). However, numerous references to dialogue between individuals (spouses, family members, professional colleagues) were easily found in web searches. As will be shown, the three domains of dialogue (political/international, inter-group/societal, and individual) were associated with different argumentative themes in my discourse samples, yet were also knitted together by common themes. I am not convinced that dialogue between private individuals is

peripheral or represents an entirely different concept.

Third, discourse about dialogue, especially in non-political contexts, often has religious and/or therapeutic undertones. Wierzbicka (2005) mentioned religion as one context in which dialogue occurs. What struck me in the discourse samples I examined were the frequent occurrence of relevant examples on religiously oriented websites or embedded in discourse registers recognizably associated with spirituality and/or therapy.

Example 2 illustrates the blending of therapeutic (intimacy, openness, vulnerability) and religious (goodness, love) discourse elements in an argument about the requirements of interpersonal dialogue:

2. "Our intimacy is directly related to our openness and vulnerability with our spouse ... We need to regularly take risks in our dialogues, be vulnerable with our spouses and trust in their goodness and their love for us."

(http://www.ematrimony.org/dialogue/3minutebarrier_quinn_20040331.htm)

The example is from eMatrimony.org, a website published by World Wide Marriage Encounter, Inc., an organization whose "mission of renewal in the church and change in the world is to assist couples and priests to live fully intimate and responsible relationships by providing them with a Catholic 'experience' and ongoing community support for such a lifestyle" (http://www.ematrimony.org/resources/wwmemission_secretariat_200307.htm).

Of course, not all mentions of interpersonal dialogue are explicitly associated with religion or spirituality, just as not all public discourse about communication uses the term "dialogue." However, discussions of communication presented in markedly religious or spiritual contexts do seem especially likely to focus on dialogue and, in doing so, also to incorporate elements of therapeutic discourse.

This point leads to a fourth qualification to Wierzbicka's analysis of dialogue: Dialogue between individuals or within groups, whether presented in a religious or a secular context, is quite often described as a technique, a structured communication process that follows certain steps and rules. These descriptions of dialogue often appear on websites associated with formal groups or training programs devoted to dialogue.

3. "Dialogue is a structured form of communication between two people. It's an attempt to communicate our feelings to our spouses. Once we begin to

understand and accept each other's feelings, our levels of emotional intimacy soar, and our relationship improves dramatically."

(<http://www.daughtersofstpaul.com/growinginfaith/lifeways/marriage2.html>)

4. "By following some simple guidelines and techniques, you can make the most out of your dialogue."(<http://www.wwme.org/rules.html>)

5. "Using the structures (and following the guidelines) described above can help lead to the personal transformations that are necessary for progress." (Weissglass 1997)

Examples 3 - 5 all refer to dialogue as a discrete communication episode conducted according to a standardized procedure involving expression of feelings, nonjudgmental listening, and so on—concepts ultimately derived from the domain of therapeutic communication. My discourse samples thus tend to confirm the important influence of therapy on contemporary popular discourse about communication (Cameron 2000).

Wierzbicka might reasonably object that these references to specific procedures of interpersonal dialogue represent a distinct sense or senses of the word that should not be confused with the more frequently occurring sense of public dialogue defined earlier. This is a technical linguistic issue that I am not prepared to address in this paper. However, my study of arguments about dialogue suggests that these various uses of the term represent, if not aspects of a single concept, at least a close family of concepts knitted together by many overlapping themes. (For a critique of Wierzbicka's approach to semantic analysis from a standpoint in argumentation theory broadly compatible with the present analysis, see Rigotti and Rocci 2005.) For purposes of this study, in any case, I have chosen to examine arguments about "dialogue" along this whole range of related senses while also attending carefully to differences across domains.

3.2 Reasons For or Against Engaging in Dialogue Differ Across Domains

Many arguments were found either advocating or (less often, but not rarely) opposing dialogue in particular contexts. These arguments tended to cluster into three broad categories that appear to be rather strongly, though not exclusively, associated with the three distinct domains of dialogue mentioned in previous section: dialogue in political contexts (especially international relations), inter-group or societal dialogue (especially involving religious groups), and dialogue

between individuals such as spouses, family members, or professional colleagues. In the following subsections I show how arguments in these three domains tended to be drawn, respectively, from realist, moral, and experiential discourses.

3.2.1 *Political/international dialogue: Appeals to outcomes, interests and power relations (realist discourse)*

References to “dialogue” in political contexts, especially in international diplomacy, occur with great frequency in contemporary public discourse around the world (at least in English). It would be interesting to know more about the history of this usage. Wierzbicka (2005) notes that it emerged only after World War II but does not go into details. In the absence of data, I can only speculate that ideas directly or indirectly attributable to intellectuals such as Martin Buber and Carl Rogers, both of whom became internationally famous in the 1950’s and ‘60’s, were somehow drawn into the political domain where dialogue came to be used as a normative ideal for public discourse (on Buber, Rogers, and public dialogue, see Cissna & Anderson 2002). If some such process occurred, however, the idea of dialogue was significantly transformed as it was assimilated into the political domain. Arguments in my discourse samples that refer to dialogue in political/international contexts tended to be couched in a “realist” discourse that has little resemblance (as Wierzbicka points out) to philosophical theories of dialogue.

In what I am calling a realist discourse, arguments for and against dialogue appeal to calculations of interest, power, and consequences. According to these arguments, parties should engage in dialogue with others with whom they are interdependent, and whom, therefore, they cannot afford to ignore, when there is a potential for agreement or cooperation in their mutual interest, and when dialogue is the most effective means to obtain desired results. Parties should not engage in dialogue when it is impossible, ineffective, or in some way against their interests to do so. The following brief examples illustrate realist arguments for (6) and against (7) dialogue.

6. “Calling Japan and the European Union ‘natural strategic partners,’ the head of the EU’s executive body called for a more intensified political dialogue ...” (Barroso urges closer Japan-EU ties 2006)

7. “The British Government’s policy towards China, a policy of dialogue and ‘quiet diplomacy’ on human rights, has failed to prevent this crackdown.” (Reynolds

1999)

3.2.2 *Inter-group/societal dialogue: Appeals to morality, justice and truth (moral discourse)*

Arguments about political dialogue are not exclusively realist. Political dialogue is sometimes advocated for idealistic reasons, for example, by pacifists who uphold it as a morally preferable alternative to war and violence without regard to calculations of interest. Moral arguments for dialogue may also be the rhetorical tactic of choice for less powerful groups seeking to influence situations dominated by more powerful groups. Political dialogue can also be opposed for moral reasons, for example, because it may tend to compromise essential principles or legitimize an evil opponent (often labeled as “terrorists” in contemporary political rhetoric).

Whereas moral argumentation seems to play a secondary role in the political domain, I found that arguments for and against inter-group or societal dialogue characteristically highlighted moral reasoning, as in the following examples.

8. “The community wants to demonstrate; we haven’t because we appreciate that the Canadian and Quebec press have not published these cartoons ... Instead, we would like to open a dialogue with our neighbours, in our mosques, to explain who the prophet Muhammad is, why he is important to the community.” (Bains 2006)

9. “And interfaith dialogues are the training grounds for us as a group to stop forbidding evil. In an effort to make Islam pleasing to the non-Muslim’s eye, we, in effect, distort Islam. We say that it is what it is not.” (<http://etori.tripod.com/dialogue.html>)

The speaker in each example is a Muslim man who argues either for or against dialogue with non-Muslims. The argument for dialogue in (8) appeals to a moral calculus of reciprocity. Muslims in Montreal wanted to demonstrate in protest against the publication by European newspapers of cartoons they regarded as blasphemous; however, they refrained from demonstrating because the Canadian press had refrained from publishing the cartoons. Inspired by this evidence of good faith, they would like to engage their “neighbours” in dialogue.

In the larger web text from which (9) is quoted, the writer does not argue that dialogue per se is evil but argues that inter-faith dialogue too often leads Muslims to misrepresent their faith and compromise their principles. Inter-faith dialogue,

therefore, is morally objectionable.

3.2.3 *Individual dialogue: Appeals to personal experience - deeper intimacy, self-change, etc. (experiential discourse)*

Turning, finally, to the domain of dialogue between private individuals, we find both a different characteristic type of arguments for dialogue and a notable absence of arguments against dialogue (of which I found none in my 50 discourse samples). In contrast to the realist discourse that characterizes the political/international domain and the moral discourse that characterizes the inter-group/societal domain, arguments about dialogue in the individual domain typically appeal to personal experience. Earlier examples (2, 3, and 5) as well as the following (10) illustrate how arguments about interpersonal dialogue are couched in this experiential discourse.

10. "Trying to explain a positive gut feeling to someone who wasn't there is always hard so I remained pretty private. Eventually after meeting with Jim and Israel a second time, I discussed my decision to be on Off The Map's 'lost persons panel' with my mother in greater detail which opened up a wonderful dialogue between us that had not previously existed before."

(<http://www.off-the-map.org/idealab/articles/idl0303-1-losthappy.html>)

The general form of these arguments is that one should make the sometimes difficult efforts required to engage in genuine dialogue (e.g., by disclosing one's true feelings, listening properly, or following recommended guidelines) because doing so will lead to positive experiences such as personal transformation, intimacy, and improved relationships. As noted earlier, this therapeutic kind of communication is not always labeled as dialogue but seems especially likely to be labeled as dialogue in contexts associated with religion or spirituality, as illustrated by (2), (3), (4), and (10).

3.3 *Themes Across Domains*

While arguments about dialogue in the political/international, inter-group/societal, and individual domains tend to draw their premises from different discourses, I also found many argumentative themes that are not strongly associated with any particular domain but seem to apply across domains.

Many of these themes fall under the general heading of normative requirements for dialogue. While reasons for and against engaging in dialogue may differ among domains, arguments assuming that certain normative requirements are

essential to genuine dialogue do not differ as markedly from one domain to another. Examples of such requirements found in my discourse samples (but not illustrated in further detail in this paper) include: clear communication, frankness, mutual respect, lack of anger, courage to speak, good faith, openness to other views and to change, and commitment to continuing the process of communication. Although these requirements may be disputable either in general or in particular situations and may take different characteristic forms in different domains (e.g. structured communication formats in the case of interpersonal dialogue), the underlying principles seem to apply quite generally, reflecting a common normative ideal of dialogue across domains.

Another category that cannot be discussed in detail within the bounds of this paper includes arguments about the possibility of dialogue: reasons why dialogue is either possible or impossible in a given situation. Some of these arguments may be distinctive to particular domains while others occur more generally. An especially interesting line of argument that seems to occur across domains is that a certain critical event creates an “opening” in which it suddenly becomes possible for dialogue to occur. As illustrated in the interpersonal domain by example 10, an act of open disclosure by one party can lead to dialogue. In the political/international domain, gestures or hints indicating one party’s interest in dialogue may similarly cause a sudden change in atmosphere that makes a broader dialogue possible. (11) and (12), both examples from the intergroup/societal domain, illustrate another common variation in which an otherwise unfortunate crisis is redeemed by virtue of having created the conditions for a productive dialogue to emerge.

11. “The race riots that have rocked France for the past two weeks have been violent and harmful ... But [the crisis] also offers the hope that smart action by the French authorities can calm the situation and hasten the launching of a deep new national dialogue over what it means to be ‘French’ today.” (Cobban 2005)

12. “And if this event allows us to do that and to begin a dialogue in a broader basis ... we can have something good come out of that, come out of this event, would be a good thing and that’s what we would very much like to do.” (NBA Commissioner David Stern 2004)

4. Conclusion: Implications for Dialogue Theory

In this concluding section I reflect briefly from the standpoint of dialogue theory,

which is not a unified theory but rather a complex field of thought comprising various theoretical approaches (for a recent collection of papers presenting a range of approaches, see Anderson, Baxter & Cissna 2004). The study of arguments about dialogue in practical discourse suggests several issues that warrant further consideration by dialogue theorists.

First, practical arguments about dialogue are framed in realist, moral, and experiential discourses, whereas dialogue has been theorized primarily in terms of experience, that is, in terms of phenomenology. Are these realist, moral, and experiential discourses of dialogue incompatible with one another? How are they related? Have theories of dialogue adequately accounted for these practical arguments? How should they be assessed and responded to from within the various lines of dialogue theory?

Second, and more specifically, certain tensions either manifestly present in, or notably absent from each of the three discourses require further theoretical analysis. Realist arguments about dialogue manifest a tension between dialogue and interest-power calculations. Dialogue is a good thing in principle but practical decisions to engage in dialogue are influenced by “realist” considerations of interdependence, power imbalances, and projected outcomes and consequences of dialogue. Moral arguments about dialogue manifest a tension between dialogue and moral absolutism. The practice of dialogue, which requires openness to other views and to change, may be judged immoral if it tends to promote compromise on principles that should be upheld absolutely or lends legitimacy to proponents of falsehood or evil. These tensions, which theories of dialogue have largely ignored, suggest practical and moral limits to dialogue that must be negotiated in particular instances.

A third tension that, in contrast, has been much discussed by theorists of dialogue but is notably absent from the discourse samples I have examined, is that between dialogue and technique. The relation of technique to dialogue is controversial in dialogue theory. In some interpretations, the two are radically incompatible because following fixed-in-advance technical procedures and focusing on anticipated outcomes contradict the openness and direct relation to the other that are regarded as essential elements of dialogue. In other interpretations, dialogue relies on skills that can be improved with training and can be facilitated by following certain structured communication formats designed to encourage open expression, listening, consideration of all views, etc. Without reviewing these theoretical arguments about dialogue in further detail, I

merely point out that I have found no evidence of this tension in my practical discourse samples. To the extent that techniques of dialogue were mentioned in my samples (primarily with reference to dialogue among individuals in intimate or professional contexts), they were identified with dialogue per se or regarded as unproblematic means of producing dialogue. Perhaps this is an issue on which practitioners of dialogue have something to learn from theorists, or theorists something to learn from practitioners, or both.

It is that dialogue on “dialogue” in practice and theory that I hope to have advanced in some small measure by means of this research.

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