




7-2009

Conversation: Possibilities of Its Repair and Descent Into Discourse and Computation

Klaus Krippendorff

University of Pennsylvania, kkrippendorff@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#), [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Krippendorff, K. (2009). Conversation: Possibilities of Its Repair and Descent Into Discourse and Computation. *Constructivist Foundations*, 4 (3), 135-147. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/134

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/134
For more information, please contact libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Conversation: Possibilities of Its Repair and Descent Into Discourse and Computation

Abstract

This essay contends that radical constructivism makes a mistake by focusing on cognition at the expense of where cognitive phenomena surface: in the interactive use of language. By contrast, it advocates a radically social constructivism grounded in the conversational nature of being human. It also urges to abandon the celebration of observation, inherited from the enlightenment's preoccupation with description, in favor of participation, the recognition that speaking and writing are acts of continuously reconstructing reality, only partly conceivable by participants yet interactively realized.

It distinguishes between conversation as observed and conversation as articulated by its participants. It postulates accountability as a chief conversational move through which conversations can regain their natural flow when disturbed and construct inherently ethical realities for their participants. Unwillingness to repair problematic conversations amounts to acquiescence to constraints that are typical of discourses and the construction of institutional realities. It suggests that the ultimate institutionalization consists of replacing institutional artifacts by computational ones, which was the aim of early cybernetics. Computational artifacts have no agency and cannot be held accountable for what they do.

This essay proposes a continuum of possible discourses between authentic conversation and computation. It concludes by calling for drawing finer distinctions within that continuum and expresses the hope for not closing off the possibility of returning to authentic conversation where humans realize their being human, not institutional actors or machines.

Keywords

Constructivism, Language, Conversation, Discourse, Institutions, Cybernetics, Computation

Disciplines

Communication | Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures | Other Social and Behavioral Sciences | Philosophy | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Sociology

Conversation

Possibilities of its Repair and Descent into Discourse and Computation

Klaus Krippendorff ◊ University of Pennsylvania, USA <kkrippendorff@asc.upenn.edu>

► **Context:** This essay contends that radical constructivism makes a mistake in focusing on cognition at the expense of where cognitive phenomena surface: in the interactive use of language. ► **Goal:** It grounds radically social constructivism by exploring the conversational nature of being human. It also urges abandoning the celebration of observation, inherited from the enlightenment's preoccupation with description, in favor of participation, the recognition that speaking and writing are acts of continuously reconstructing reality, which is only partly conceivable yet is interacted with. ► **Method:** It distinguishes between conversation as observed and conversation as articulated by its participants. It postulates accountability as a chief conversational move through which conversations can regain their natural flow when disturbed and construct inherently ethical realities for their participants. Unwillingness to repair problematic conversations amounts to acquiescence to constraints that are typical of discourses and the construction of institutional realities. ► **Implications:** It suggests that the ultimate institutionalization consists of replacing institutional artifacts with computational ones, which was the aim of early cybernetics. Computational artifacts have no agency and cannot be held accountable for what they do. This essay proposes a continuum of possible discourses between authentic conversation and computation. It concludes by calling for the drawing of finer distinctions within that continuum and expresses the hope for not closing off the possibility of returning to authentic conversation where humans realize their being human – rather than institutional actors or machines. ► **Key words:** Language, institutions, conversation, computation, participation, cybernetics.

Introduction

In my answer to Ernst von Glasersfeld's (2008) question, "Who conceives of society?" I proposed a radically social constructivism (Krippendorff 2008a) that overcomes what I perceive to be an unfortunate cognitivism in von Glasersfeld's, Heinz von Foerster's, and Humberto Maturana's work. Since then, I published two other papers on the subject. One (2008b) moves the notion of human agency into the center of my project, focusing on its role in conceptions of social organizations – a concept less grand than "society"; one (2008c) teases out several reflexive turns that have grown in cybernetics but cannot be subsumed by the epistemology of radical constructivism and second-order cybernetics, which privileges observation and a representational theory of language over participation in conversation and cooperative construc-

tions of reality. In all of these efforts, conversation has become the starting point of my conceptualizations of being human. In this essay, I wish to discuss what conversation entails, how it is maintained, and under which conditions it degenerates into something else.

Since Martin Heidegger, many philosophers have based their work on the contention that humans live in language. I concur with this proposition but must warn that there are several conceptions of language (Volosinov 1986) and it is important to be clear about the specific conception of language when subscribing to such a proposition. Linguistic conceptions of language are largely due to Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) unfortunate but consequential distinction between "langue" and "parole." For him, *langue*, the French word for language, is the relatively *enduring system of rules and conventions* common to all of its speakers, and *parole*, the French word for

speaking, is what speakers do with language. The latter is considered full of idiosyncrasies, marred by individual incompetencies, entirely situational, messy, difficult to study, and hence excluded from the object that linguistics constructs and calls *language*. Also, for Saussure, *langue* and *parole* are what *individuals* speak. That we always speak in the expectation of being understood by those addressed, in *social relations with others*, not merely expressing our experiences to the world. Inter-individual relationships do not enter traditional linguistic inquiries, socio-linguistics nudging excepted. In my view, linguists study a convenient abstraction from processes of conversations, purporting to be the systematic and conventional structure that governs individual speakers. It construes that abstraction as the government of individual speech.

For me, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's (1980, 1987) term "languageing," or "the use of language," brings the linguist abstraction back to where it is embodied, in real people speaking with each other. Languageing is a process of mutual human engagement. It is not just a biological capability. Languageing has a history: developmentally, in the sense that individual humans learn it from each other; etymologically, in the sense that spoken utterances and written words have lineages that go back generations of uses by largely unrecognized cultural ancestors; and ontogenetically, in the sense that it goes hand in glove with the evolution and use of cultural artifacts. Languageing is a social or inter-personal phenomenon, not a cognitive one.

For Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953; Schulte 1992), *language is a game* we play with each other, and the meaning of its words is the history of acquiring their use. When we learn a language, we learn to coordinate ourselves with present others. This is quite consistent with Maturana's (1988) conception of language as the con-sensual coordination of con-sensual coordinations of actions. The dash

01 between “con” and “sensual” is mine and is
 02 intended to highlight the jointly sensing of
 03 (focusing on) something and each other by
 04 speakers, and to prevent the common reading
 05 of “consensual” as relating to consensus or
 06 agreement. Playing soccer, for example,
 07 requires much coordination among players
 08 relative to a moving ball. But what makes han-
 09 dling that ball a soccer game has much to do
 10 with the interpretation of written rules, for
 11 example, by referees who must declare some-
 12 thing to be a violation or a scored goal, or
 13 which team won.

14 I contend that Wittgenstein’s choice of the
 15 game metaphor may not have been an entirely
 16 happy one as it suggests language as a means
 17 of accomplishing something; a tool, for exam-
 18 ple, to decide who won the game. Surely this
 19 is not what he implied. Rather, his language
 20 games do not need to be finite and may well
 21 be ongoing, a “way of life” in which people
 22 have the courage to change their being with
 23 each other. I have similar misgiving with the
 24 idea of language as the coordination of coordi-
 25 nations of actions. Language does not con-
 26 trol anything. Speakers interact with each
 27 other and define themselves interactively, not
 28 as individual actors, but as participants, act-
 29 ing jointly (Shotter 1993). Even in a soccer
 30 game, not all participants are eager to win the
 31 game. Besides the two teams of players,
 32 including their coaches, there are referees,
 33 audiences, field owners, and their employees,
 34 whose diverse realities are necessary but not
 35 questioned during a game. As Wittgenstein
 36 reminds us, using language does something.
 37 In the process of speaking, realities are coop-
 38 eratively created and maintained in which
 39 speakers constitutively participate in relation
 40 to each other. Human relations, soccer games,
 41 cities, and technologies are interactive accom-
 42 plishments, cognition always playing only a
 43 part in them. What individual soccer players
 44 have in mind may well affect the outcome of
 45 the game but does not determine its end.

46 In (2008c), I worked towards the conclu-
 47 sion that *cybernetics is an interdisciplinary dis-*
 48 *course that brings radically reflexive realities*
 49 *into being*, which includes attention to a host
 50 of familiar constructions from feedback
 51 loops, self-references, recursions, autono-
 52 mies, to its own constructive use of language.
 53 There I suggested that second-order cyberne-
 54 ticians do not go far enough when they merely
 55 reflect on their observations, taking responsi-

bility for observing, constructing realities,
 and describing that process to others. The
 idea that observers observe their observations
 abstracts individual capabilities from the fab-
 ric of conversations in which observations
 become inter-individually meaningful and in
 which constructions of reality become coordi-
 nated among interlocutors. I am suggesting
 that the realities we say we see or think we
 know are not mere cognitive constructions,
 they become intelligible and are continually
 shaped in conversations. The point is that
 words do something (Austin 1962), organiza-
 tions are performed in conversations (Krip-
 pendorff 2008b), and theories can change the
 very world they claim to describe, right in
 front of their theorists’ eyes (Krippendorff
 2009: 112–130) with reality conforming to or
 running away from the unreflected belief in
 its representation in language.

For this reason, I prefer not to ground my
 argument in a radical constructivist concep-
 tion of reality as a cognitive construction, or in
 its objectivist counterpart: that physical or
 biological reality affords (explains) our per-
 ception. To me, physicists construct a universe
 for the sole convenience of getting answers to
 their questions (Werner Heisenberg: “What
 we observe is not nature itself, but nature
 exposed to our method of questioning”).
 Physics becomes foundational when insisting
 that the reality it constructs underlies every-
 thing else. Similarly, biology becomes founda-
 tional when claiming that the living systems
 that biologists construct underlie all human
 sciences. Foundationalisms are often main-
 tained by denying the discourses in which they
 are claimed. All questions and answers, truth
 claims, theories, and conceptions are articu-
 lated in conversations; not realizing them as
 arguments or claims diverts attention from
 how realities are socially constructed to what
 results from that process, from what we
 humans create to what we dare not question.
 The conception of causality, for example – has
 no place for human agency. The conception of
 autopoiesis – basic to biology – is entirely
 optional to, has no effect on how beings orga-
 nize their lives. Finally, cognitive autonomy,
 which underlies radical constructivists’ expla-
 nations of human cognitive abilities, is an
 epiphenomenon of conversations and other
 forms of interaction. Cognitive phenomena
 cannot be observed, least of all located in

someone’s brain. They become manifest in
 institutionalized vocabularies that psycholog-
 ical experimenters can elicit from their sub-
 jects – experiences, understandings, concep-
 tual models, intentions, and other individual
 abilities – omitting the essentially linguistic,
 social, interactive, embodied, and ongoing
 nature of the situation in which such data
 emerge as co-constructed.

In his paper, *Producing a Cognition*,
 Charles Antaki (2006) gives a good example
 of an interview that is designed to test the cog-
 nitive ability of respondents. It starts with an
 interviewee’s denial of having any knowledge
 of where his money comes from. But after
 interacting with the interviewer, the inter-
 viewee ends up constructing an answer that
 satisfies both the interviewer and the respon-
 dent. This is one of many conclusive demon-
 strations for cognition to be constructed
 interactively and in language. Here, cognition
 is housed neither in the mind of the inter-
 viewee nor in that of the interviewer.

I am suggesting that all sciences are prac-
 ticed in constrained conversations, in dis-
 course, as I will detail below. They create and
 rearticulate their objects so as to be observ-
 able and rearticulable within their respective
 discourse communities. Contrary to conven-
 ient but questionable beliefs that their
 objects precede attention to them, I contend
 that the realities the sciences describe are the
 artifacts of constrained conversational prac-
 tices by their communities. Almost every-
 thing we think we know, plan, build, and use
 emerges from disciplined verbal and non-ver-
 bal interactions.

It makes sense, therefore, to ground this
 essay in where questions are asked, truth
 claims are negotiated, and realities are co-
 constructed, that is, in *conversations*. This is
 where physical, biological, cognitive, linguis-
 tic, and sociological realities are created and
 take hold of the imaginations of diverse com-
 munities whose members listen to, live with,
 and enact these conversational realities. I am
 assuming that we humans, like all animals, are
 constituted in togetherness as a condition of
 our existence, not in biological or cognitive
 functioning. For some species, togetherness is
 short lived, consisting of coincidental cou-
 pling, birthing, and temporary caring. For us
 humans, togetherness is richer. It involves
 interactively coordinated languaging during
 which we are constantly reminded that our

engagement with each other has a history that precedes our participation in it and this history inevitably resonates in ongoing conversations. Conversation is one explanation that constitutes itself in practicing human togetherness.

The following two sections describe conversation from two contrasting positions. The first applies von Foerster and Maturana's variously articulated conception of a standard scientific observer (here of conversation) whose aim is to be conscious of his or her acts of observing and describing his or her observations/constructions to others. The second takes the position of a participant in conversations whose competencies reside in contributing to what is happening there. The difference between these two positions is not found in the difference between objective and subjective accounts of the same phenomena but between outsider and insider accounts. All accounts occur in conversations and are offered in the first position by one observer (of conversations) to a community of other observers, and in the second position by participants in the very process to be accounted for. I am using the second section not only as a critique of the first, showing the epistemological limitations of celebrating observers and observations, but also as a reference to what happens when conversation degenerates into something else.

Conversation observed

Morphologically, "con-" means together, joint, or among, and "-versation" has many roots, from making "verse" out of experiences as poets do, being "conversant" in a subject matter, to a "version," translation or interpretation of something, including of reality. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1991: 868) traces "Conversation" to the 12th century and gives its earliest meaning as "The action of living or having one's being in a place of or among persons" and "The action of consorting or having dealings with others; living together; commerce, intercourse, society, intimacy." In the 16th century, conversation became "Interchange of thoughts and words; familiar discourse or talk." This etymology suggests the meaning of conversation to be remarkably stable. Its overriding use as *a way of being together in talk and interaction* serves me well.

Contrasting dialogue with writing, I suggested: Everything said is said in the expectation of being understood by an addressee. Everything heard as being said is taken as having been said by one person to another. Understanding does not need to be mutual and shared, but needs to be complementary in how it is performed (Krippendorff 2009: 159). Minimally, conversation requires two participants in interlacing expectations. Charles Goodwin (1981: 4), citing Erving Goffman (1976), differentiates three listeners to talk. Those who *overhear* a conversation without being part of it and without the expectation or ability to respond, those who are part of a conversation and (in case of three or more participants) *are addressed* by the speaker and expected to respond, or those *not addressed* and not expected to respond. Goffman and Goodwin thought of overhearers as casual bystanders. I am including as bystanders the observers of conversations – for example, through a one-way mirror – the listeners to wire tapped telephone conversations, the viewers of verbal interactions on a movie screen, and, most important here, the conversation analysts, typically working from transcripts of naturally occurring talk. The latter are scientific observers of conversation and I maintain their view is necessarily unlike the view of involved participants.

As a scientific *observer*, overhearing and recording conversations from their outside, Robert Nofsinger (1991) considers conversations as:

■ *Mundane activities* among those observed together. Everyone is able to engage in conversation with others without specialized knowledge, preparation or equipment. This observation may need to be qualified by noting that conversation is learned. Mothers incessantly talk to their babies, initially pleased to get at least a smile in response. It is not clear how babies or children listen, but in time, their participation becomes richer and entirely natural or mundane. Then Nofsinger's observation applies.

■ *Common occurrences*. Conversations are observed everywhere, at home, at work, while shopping, in public places, on the telephone, and between waking up in the morning and exchanging intimacies with a partner at night. While mostly taking place among acquaintances, conversations also

occur among strangers such as when waiting in line for a cashier or in a doctor's office.

■ *Interactively unfolding in time*. Participants take turns and respond to each other's utterances. A conversation essentially is a sequential activity. It creates its own history. This history can be recorded, videotaped, transcribed, and examined in detail, providing analyzable data.

■ *Locally managed*. During the course of a conversation, participants themselves determine who speaks, for how long, and in which order. Responsibility for maintaining a conversation is distributed among those present.

■ *Accompanied by other activities*. Participants do not merely *say* something to each other when they talk. They also *do* something at the same time. Activities may include non-verbal expressions – gestures, eye contact, variations in voice – but they also establish relationships among speakers and coordinate parallel activities. Conversations between the pilot and copilot direct an airplane's flight; within a team of designers, result in a novel technology; between therapist and a client, produce new realities, ostensibly for the client but in fact for both; among business partners, shape actionable agreements; or among the employees of a social organization, determine what that organization is and how everyone contributes to it. Conversations coordinate the realities of everyday life.

Other scholars consider conversations as:

■ *Extendable to mediated activities*. Although speaking a language is acquired in the bodily presence of others in conversation, once learned, conversations can continue through interactive media, between participants out of sight of each other. Exchanging written letters, once the only form of mediated conversation, is being replaced by telephone conversations, online discussions, email, and texting. While all mediated conversations omit some features of face-to-face conversations – sight in telephone conversations, identity in some text-based internet discussions – they always extend desirable dimensions – distance, for example. Yet, even in mediated conversations, participants are aware of each other.

Academic interests in conversations assume conversations to be

■ *Analyzable and theorizable*, usually from recordings and transcripts that allow the conversation analyst to examine and

01 reexamine the data for patterns that may oth-
02 erwise escape even the most attentive listen-
03 ing, or in the case of mediated conversations,
04 casual reading.

05 Theories based on such data always are
06 and cannot be anything other than the theo-
07 ries of observers, not of the observed partici-
08 pants – unless the latter articulate their theory
09 in use, which is rare. However, the position of
10 observers and participants should not be con-
11 fused on epistemological grounds. Also, theo-
12 ries always reflect the disciplinary interests
13 of theorists in a limited aspect of the available
14 data. For example, therapists typically look
15 for clues to a diagnosis of their clients' mental
16 problems, ignoring everything else, including
17 their own creative contributions to this end.
18 Employers may examine interview data to
19 predict whether an interviewee will fit their
20 job description; cognitive scientists select
21 from verbal interactions that which allows
22 them to infer what is going on in participants'
23 minds. Conversation analysts are not
24 immune to such limitations either when seek-
25 ing to invent rules that could explain the orga-
26 nization of talk and exchange of written mes-
27 sages, except that their theories tend not to
28 aim at generalizations but are satisfied with
29 moment-to-moment explanations.

30 It is often taken for granted that conversa-
31 tion analysts can hardly proceed without
32 speaking the language of the participants in
33 observed conversations, nor can they succeed
34 without conversational experiences on their
35 own. Even the transcripts they prepare are
36 cultural artifacts that speak of the analysts'
37 competencies to engage in and write down
38 what they observe. Reliance on such data
39 questions the detachment that conversation
40 analysts seek to project in their analyses and
41 explanations.

42 Insightful analysts may well have been
43 part of the very conversations they subse-
44 quently analyze. Goodwin (1981), for exam-
45 ple, taped many birthday parties and gather-
46 ings among friends, bringing insider
47 experiences into his analysis. But being
48 forced to demonstrate the validity of a con-
49 versation analysis in terms of quotes from
50 transcripts or clips from video recordings
51 encourages explanations of sequential inter-
52 actions, turn taking, and how categories of
53 utterances follow each other. Such sequential
54 data lead some analysts to causal explana-
55 tions, for example, John Searle (1969) and

other speech act theorists invoke “illocution-
ary forces” to explain what speech acts do;
Gordon Pask (1975, 1976) relies on compu-
tational explanations of conversations. Such
explanations make sense from the position of
an observer who has no direct access to the
choices that participants exercise and what
motivated them. All they can work from is
how observations follow each other.

While acknowledging local management
as a defining feature of conversations, what
conversation analysts easily overlook is their
inability to account for what is happening
inside conversations. Self-organizing sys-
tems, by definition, develop their own iden-
tities, their own realities, and their own
meanings for what occurs within their
boundaries. For outsiders, it is extraordi-
narily difficult, perhaps impossible, to explain
why participants say what they say and how a
conversation develops the way it does, except
for the above-mentioned possibility of asking
questions of the participants, in effect inter-
vening in the conversation of interest, thus
bringing their own conversational experi-
ences into the very conversation to be ana-
lyzed.

By analyzing the transcripts of conversa-
tions, conversation analysts notice patterns
that may mean nothing to participants inside
conversations. To claim that participants in
conversation are unaware of the patterns that
conversation analysts are “discovering,” or
more correctly, “constructing,” is epistemo-
logically untenable – unless analysts step out
of their observer role, explore their hypothe-
ses with the participants in a conversation,
and thus become conversationally involved,
leaving their preferred observer role. In the
social sciences, participant accounts largely
are considered unreliable and not born out by
observational facts. Preservation of objectiv-
ity was one reason for linguistics to exclude
parole and conversations from their object of
study. Conversation analysts are not commit-
ted to the abstract-objectivist notions of lan-
guage (Volosinov 1986) that linguists pursue
but also shy away from becoming conversa-
tionally involved in their object of analysis.

To appreciate the severe limitations of
understanding conversations by overhearing
or observing conversations from the outside,
let me now describe, as far as possible, con-
versation from within the process, as a partici-
pant.

Authentic conversation 01

02
03 In existential philosophy, authenticity has to
04 do with being true to one's self despite pres-
05 sures from society to be otherwise. There,
06 authenticity is celebrated as an individualist
07 ideal that denies the conversational reality of
08 being human. I am using authenticity here to
09 refer to the pleasure of participating in
10 togetherness in which one is free to speak for
11 oneself, not in the name of absent others, not
12 under pressure to say things one does not
13 believe in, and not having to hide something
14 for fear of being reprimanded or excluded
15 from further conversations. But I will be more
16 specific than that.

17 Authentic conversation is not easily, if at
18 all, identifiable from the outside. How would
19 an observer access someone's construction in
20 progress, why something is said, and what is
21 not being said? Questions of this kind should
22 not be dismissed as being subjective. Inas-
23 much as participants in conversations can be
24 asked and may be willing to account for their
25 feelings, the act of making them public, where
26 they can be dealt with in the very conversa-
27 tions that elicit them, renders feelings – sup-
28 posedly subjective – inter-subjectively accept-
29 able. One is reminded of Wittgenstein's
30 argument against private language. Partici-
31 pant accounts are not only richer in meaning
32 and closer to what is going on inside a con-
33 versation than their observable manifestations,
34 but also more predictable of how a conversa-
35 tion unfolds – at least to the satisfaction of the
36 participants.

37 *Participants* in authentic conversations –
38 whether as speakers or listeners, and in case of
39 the latter, whether addressed and expected to
40 respond or waiting for their turn – may expe-
41 rience conversations as:

42 ■ *Occurring in the presence of addressable*
43 *and responsive individuals.* In authentic con-
44 versations, participants distinguish them-
45 selves and each other by the contributions
46 they make to them. The act of distinguishing
47 oneself is public. It does not impose identities
48 on others, which is what observers are des-
49 tined to do. When participants cannot be seen
50 as addressable or the source of their voices
51 cannot be distinguished – for example, when
52 in a large and anonymous crowd – conversa-
53 tion is no longer authentic.

54 ■ *Maintaining mutual understanding.* In
55 conversations, mutuality, agreement, and

01 coordination of understanding and acting are
02 of central concern for all participants. How-
03 ever, since cognition cannot be observed and
04 nobody can compare their own understand-
05 ing with that of others, in conversations,
06 understanding or the lack of it, is performa-
07 tive and evident in certain speech acts, such as
08 “I understand,” “I agree,” or “tell me more.”
09 Here, acknowledging understanding does not
10 mean similarity or sharing of conceptions, its
11 affirmation constitutes an invitation to go on,
12 including to other subjects.

13 Observers, by contrast, are effectively
14 excluded from the possibilities of checking
15 their understanding of what they overhear
16 against the performative understanding
17 among participants in conversation. In this
18 respect, analysts of transcripts of conversa-
19 tions or written exchanges are literally “out of
20 the loop,” isolated, and responsive, at most, to
21 their scientific community of equally
22 detached observers.

23 ■ *Self-organizing and constituted in the*
24 *contributions their participants make to each*
25 *other.* Conversations are communicationally
26 closed. They are not abstracted from any-
27 thing. They are embodied in real participants’
28 talking and listening to each other, respond-
29 ing to what they heard, and acting accord-
30 ingly. The identity of a conversation – dinner
31 conversation, political deliberation therapeu-
32 tic session, focus group discussion, business
33 meeting, or design project – emerges from
34 talk and text generated within that conversa-
35 tion. With the emergence of conversational
36 identities comes the feeling of being part of it,
37 referring to its participants by the inclusive
38 “we.” How the responsibility to maintain the
39 flow of conversational moves is distributed
40 among participants and the direction in
41 which a conversation is going is always uncer-
42 tain – save for one’s own contribution.
43 Among participants, this uncertainty is not a
44 deficiency, however. Participants trust each
45 other to make sense of what is said.

46 Observers who seek to understand a con-
47 versation from a recording of what happened,
48 looking at it from a God’s eye view, cannot
49 possibly appreciate the feeling of being part of
50 it, the feeling of being able to shape an always
51 evolving conversation, and the feeling of
52 trusting each other to maintain the flow. As
53 Michael Billig (2006) noted, we have a rich
54 vocabulary of inner processes – feelings,
55 thoughts, attitudes, experiences, memories

and reasons – in terms of which psychologists
construct the cognitive processes of their
interest without being observable. However,
it is because the conversational use of these
words is public and coordinated with other
speakers of a language that they become
meaningful in conversations, not as descrip-
tion of individual states but as performing
certain speech acts.

■ *Intuitive, not rule governed.* Authentic
conversations are embodied practices. Turn
taking, topic switching, coordination of reality
constructions is natural, requiring no reflec-
tion, no preparation, no special training – as
Nofsinger said, notwithstanding the fact that
children, born into a community, need to learn
joining its conversations. Children do not learn
rules, however, and then apply them. They
learn to interact with others by speaking much
like how they see and hear others interacting
with them. Authentic conversations do not fol-
low rules; they give birth to further conversa-
tions. Only after sufficient conversational com-
petencies are acquired is it possible to talk of
improper practices – “do not interrupt,” “don’t
be rude,” or “listen!” from which conversa-
tional conventions may emerge. But authentic
conversations may go on without them.

Conversation theorists may well draw use-
ful distinctions from the transcripts of con-
versations, for example, by analyzing conversa-
tional triples and adjacency pairs,
formulating and testing hypotheses about
how natural conversations are organized
(Goodwin, 1981), postulating conversational
maxims (Grice, 1975, 1978), or theorizing a
universal pragmatics for ideal speech situa-
tions (Habermas, 1970, 2001). But all of these
grand theoretical precepts are constructions
by and for outsiders to conversations.

Conversation analysts have the tendency to
claim that participants implicitly follow the
rules they have invented. This claim is episte-
mologically preposterous, however. Drawing
on Sigmund Freud, Billig (2006) makes a use-
ful distinction between the unconscious and
the preconscious. The former is an observer’s
construction of cognition that is inaccessible
to an observed individual (and often related to
oppression). The latter is an observer’s con-
struction of what that individual does not at-
tend to at the moment, takes for granted while
conversing with others. But from the perspec-
tive of social construction, there is the possibil-
ity that conversation analytic vocabularies en-

ter a conversation and start coordinating par-
ticipants’ talk whether of cognitive conditions
or conversational rules. In other words, while
the results of conversation analysis may not
have anything to do with how conversation is
practiced, teaching conversation theoret-
ical explanations diverts practitioners’ atten-
tion from what they had been doing naturally.

■ *Dialogically equal.* By dialogical equal-
ity I mean that every participant in a conver-
sation has the possibility of contributing to it.
Nobody feels excluded. Every contribution,
even silence, is respected and appropriately
responded to.

Indeed, participation is rarely observed
equal. Some participants inevitably speak
more than others do, leading to claims of
observed power inequalities within conversa-
tions. Moreover, participants usually have
unequal resources (experiences) to contrib-
ute. Turn taking is inherently asymmetrical.
However, such interpretations of observed
differences in frequencies as indicators of ine-
qualities may not matter to insiders to whom
unequal experiences may not be detrimental
to authentic conversations, more likely, they
are what keeps a conversation alive. Even with-
out making an observable contribution, the
perception of being able to contribute when
the opportunity arises and be accepted for
what one says is all that matters. Needless to
say, dialogical equality is not observable from
outside a conversation. Participants may not
notice it either but might articulate its lack.

■ *Creating possibilities of participation.*
Conversations may well take place while
doing a job. But besides correlations with a
purpose, conversations are inherently cre-
ative, offering participants possibilities to
contribute and realize themselves in the con-
tributions they and others make to the pro-
cess. One obvious example of opening possi-
bilities of participation is to raise questions
not previously answered, inviting addressees
to construct answers. Conversational possi-
bilities expand when participants assure each
other that their contributions are understood,
important, and appreciated (Brown &
Levinson 1987), and that their creativity is
appreciated. Creating and maintaining possi-
bilities for others relates to von Foerster’s
(1981: 308) ethical imperative: “Act always so
as to increase the number of choices.” Here, I
am embedding his imperative in the context
of social interactions. Socially relevant

01 choices, not their numbers, are the gifts that
02 partners in communication can offer each
03 other (Krippendorff 2009: 34).

04 Obviously, possibilities can be created,
05 pondered, exhausted, and constrained, but
06 not observed. It should also be noted that not
07 all questions may invite participation, as I
08 shall discuss below.

09 ■ *Irreversible, progressive, and unique.*

10 For participants, conversations never
11 repeat themselves. Each turn is experienced as
12 unique; each utterance reveals its speakers'
13 shifting perspectives. As Heraclitus suggested,
14 "you cannot step in the same river twice." Partic-
15 ipants have numerous conversational
16 moves available to alert each other to redun-
17 dant threads: "here we go again!" "didn't you
18 already tell that story," "old news," etc. Indeed,
19 it makes no sense to repeat stories unless they
20 have been forgotten or decisions unless they
21 have not been followed up or been previously
22 undone.

23 For conversation analysts, each transcript
24 may well be unique as well. However, scientific
25 analysis calls for the identification of recurrent
26 pattern and generalizations at the cost of
27 excluding the very uniqueness to which the
28 participants in conversations respond.
29 Observers tend to be blind to the unique con-
30 tributions made in conversations. Participants
31 tend to be blind to the repetitions they take for
32 granted. Evidently, observers and participants
33 construct realities that are orthogonal to each
34 other but not necessarily incompatible.

35 ■ *Coordinating constructions of reality.*

36 Conversations always leave artifacts behind,
37 minimally the memories of their own history.
38 Other artifacts include the always evolving
39 relationships among participants. But most
40 important are the changes that participants
41 introduce into the world while being in and
42 after participating in conversations: decisions
43 with practical consequences, institutionaliza-
44 tions of procedures, projects, designs or texts,
45 and realizations of diverse technologies.
46 Rarely do these artifacts correspond to any
47 one individual's cognition. Participants sup-
48 plement each other's contributions (Gergen
49 1994). Indeed, furniture, cars, computers, the
50 internet and cities are designed in the course
51 of many conversations, having long histories
52 with changing participants but a common
53 thread. Conceptions of these artifacts need
54 not be shared and mostly cannot be articu-
55 lated in full by any one individual but may

complement each other in the interactions
that set these artifacts in motion.

Conversation theorists cannot achieve
such coordinations for their theories – unless
they join the conversation they are theorizing
and become active participants, no longer
observers. Similarly, theorists of technology
are comfortable in describing the histories of
technological developments, but rarely appre-
ciate the multiple conversational grounds of
such developments, much less dare to forecast
technological developments. The belief in
technological determinism is an extreme case
of denying the role of language and social
interaction that drives such developments.

■ *Continuable in principle.* From the
perspective of external observers, conversa-
tions may be short, such as between occu-
pants of neighboring seats on a city bus, ter-
minating when they no longer sit next to each
other, or long, such as between teenage
friends who talk for hours on the telephone.
For observers, both examples are finite in
time. But what they have in common is the
possibility of their continuation at a later
time, at a different place, and perhaps includ-
ing new participants, no matter what has hap-
pened in between separate encounters. When
children move out of their family – for
instance, when they go to college – and stay in
touch with their family members and friends
by telephone, email, or text messaging, they
continue to weave the conversational realities
they had started long ago, albeit by different
means, across geographical distances, and
under continuously changing circumstances.
Conversations can terminate when they
degenerate into other forms of interactions,
incompatible with the above, and, in the
extreme, when violence enters, which is a cat-
egorically different way of being together.

Evidently, there are vast differences
between how participants see themselves in
authentic conversations and what outside
observers, conversation analysts, can record,
analyze, articulate, and theorize. The two
positions are con-sensually different, distin-
guished by unlike epistemologies, unlike rela-
tionships to their objects of attention, and
unlike experiences with the subject matter of
talk or writing. I am not devaluing the posi-
tion of the conversation analyst, but wish to
highlight that their reality constructions nec-
essarily differ from the ones of those who are
conversationally involved with each other.

Accountability and possibilities of repairs

The above depicts conversations as self-orga-
nizing and unproblematic verbal and non-
verbal interactions among participants,
including the constructions of reality they
produce. Authentic conversation is typical
among trusting friends but also among
strangers who, having nothing to lose, feel
alive in each other's presence. I do not expect
participants able to describe what authentic
conversation entails – as I tried above – but to
become aware when disruptions of it are
experienced.

In everyday life, people do not always
respond in perfect alignment to each other.
We say things that may not be understood as
intended, interrupt someone's turn, offend
someone without wanting to, or talk too
much and thereby preempt others from
speaking their mind. Besides such unin-
tended disruption of unproblematic interac-
tions, we know of systematic and institution-
alized disruptions that we may notice when
they occur but fail to address for a variety of
reasons. I maintain that conversational com-
petencies include ample possibilities to repair
problematic conversational sequences within
them. Whether or not we utilize these linguis-
tic resources and how aware we are of these
possibilities is a big question that I cannot
answer here. Often it is only after encounter-
ing the efforts of others to repair problematic
conversations that we are made aware of how
we deviate from authentic conversation –
without implying the ability to articulate just
how a conversation got astray. Possibly the
most important linguistic resource for repair-
ing disruptions of authentic conversations is
accountability.

I contend that everything said is said not
only in the expectation of being understood
by addressees but also in the expectation of
being held accountable for what was said or
done. As John Shotter (1984, 1993) suggests,
speakers tend to articulate their contributions
to a conversation not merely in response to
other speakers but also with possible accounts
in mind in case their contributions are chal-
lenged. The process of holding participants
accountable may be initiated by noting an
infelicitous, untoward, or problematic con-
versational move, action, or sequence of
exchanges. Expressing dis-ease with some-

01 one's contribution – sometimes called meta-
02 communication – amounts to a momentary
03 disruption of that flow and implies a request
04 for an account by the presumed source of that
05 dis-ease. Requests for an account may also be
06 made directly: "Why did you say that?" "What
07 do you want to accomplish with that propo-
08 sal? "Why do you come so late?" The
09 account subsequently given is then evaluated
10 and either accepted or rejected, and in case of
11 the latter, a new account may be requested,
12 until the issue is resolved (Buttny 1993).

13 The most typical accounts are explana-
14 tions, justifications, excuses (Mills 1940; Scott
15 & Lyman 1968), and apologies. The interac-
16 tions they set in motion are part of the conver-
17 sation. They differ from the unproblematic
18 flow of a conversation by focusing on the
19 interaction in question, not on what they con-
20 struct.

21 ■ *Explanations* are least disruptive of
22 conversations. They respond to assertions
23 such as "I don't understand" "I am not follow-
24 ing you," and questions such as "can you clar-
25 ify?" or "what do you mean by that?" Explana-
26 tions, once accepted as making sense, have the
27 effect of coordinating participants' under-
28 standing performatively and bringing a con-
29 versation back to an unproblematic flow.
30 Good explanations rearticulate or expand
31 what had been said in terms compatible with
32 listeners' background of understanding.

33 ■ *Justifications* acknowledge a speaker's
34 agency in an actual or anticipated happening,
35 and respond to expressed doubts of the merit
36 of that happening. Justifications may be
37 defensive when responding to challenges or
38 preparatory when actions are proposed with
39 the intent to seek approval. Often justifica-
40 tions are used to enroll listeners into the
41 speaker's project (Krippendorff 2008b). Once
42 justifications are accepted, conversation can
43 proceed to other topics.

44 ■ *Excuses*, by contrast, deny a speaker's
45 or actor's agency, intention, or involvement in
46 what happened and offer grounds for not
47 being responsible for it. Typical excuses are
48 appeals to external causes, lack of knowledge,
49 accidents, being under the influence of drugs,
50 or having acted on the orders of a superior.
51 The latter may shift blame to someone else,
52 which is a common diversion. If accepted,
53 excuses render speakers blameless and enable
54 them to continue their participation in the
55 conversation. Excuses rely on narratives that

are intended to be compelling, but not neces-
sarily true by extra-conversational standards.
Excuses do not change the condition for
which they are offered.

■ *Apologies* admit responsibility for an
offensive conversational move or action,
express regret, and imply the promise not to
repeat it in the future. Unlike excuses, apolo-
gies admit the actor's agency. Accepting an
apology forgives the perpetrators of offensive
conversational moves or actions and is a way
to continue the conversation in the hope that
the offense will not recur.

Shotter's (1984, 1993) observation that all
speakers talk in the expectation of being held
accountable by listeners for what they say and
do applies to the act of giving accounts as well.
Accounts too are always articulated in the
hope of being accepted and only those that
have that chance are offered. Although
accounts may well appeal to general conven-
tions – rationality, common benefits, individ-
ual values, or established practices – such con-
ventions are effective only in the very
conversations in which participants are will-
ing to let them stand. Inasmuch as the mutual
acceptance of practices of living together is a
matter of *ethics* by definition, successful
accounts provide narratives that participants
in conversation consider ethical. Thus, in
repairing problematic conversations, conver-
sation-specific ethical narratives are pro-
posed, tested, and accepted, i.e., narratives
that participants can live with and find no rea-
son to object to. The ethics that emerges in
repaired conversations has two remarkable
features. It is rarely generalizable to all con-
versations – effectively denying their univer-
sality; for example, the universal pragmatics
of communication proposed by Habermas
(1970) – and it cannot be represented by any
one observer's or participant's cognitive con-
struction. Conversational ethical realities are
performed in conversations or interactively
constructed.

Accounts may be personal, "I was angry,"
informational, "I didn't know that," related to
efficiency, "this is all I could afford," ethical, "I
didn't want to hurt her," moral, "everyone
does it," pragmatic, "it worked in the past," or
institutional, "this is the approved procedure."

Problematic conversations can be consid-
ered repaired when they resume their natural
flow. However, conversations are not
machines that can be fixed by replacing defec-

01 tive parts. Successful repairs have the poten- 01
02 tial of leaving memorable residues behind, an 02
03 awareness of what happened and how it was 03
04 resolved. Such residues may become part of 04
05 the history of a conversation and direct that 05
06 conversation's future along paths not taken 06
07 without prior repairs. Therefore, a history of 07
08 successful repairs holds the seeds of conven- 08
09 tional accounting practices in terms of which 09
10 future problematic conversational moves 10
11 may become explained, justified, excused, or 11
12 apologized for. 12

13 Thus, unless the history of repairs is for- 13
14 gotten, repaired conversation may no longer 14
15 be quite authentic and I would argue this con- 15
16 dition to be most common in naturally occur- 16
17 ring conversations. 17

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55

While language always provides ample
resources for repairing untoward conversa-
tional moves or actions, this is not to say that
all disruptions of the flow of interactions are
indeed repaired. Not repairing problematic
conversations is not limited to children who
are in the process of developing accounting
competencies. It applies to competent speak-
ers as well. Failing to repair conversations that
have turned problematic has two important
social consequences. On the one hand, partic-
ipants who do not hold each other account-
able for what they say or do, whether for rea-
sons of expediency or fear of reprisals, grant
implicit permission to continue the untoward
practices, which can lead to their tacit legiti-
mization. On the other hand, participants
who refuse to give adequate accounts when
requested of them claim exceptional privi-
leges, in effect, which can lead to the institu-
tion of inequalities and violate the dialogical
equality that authentic conversation requires.

There may be reasonable and unfortunate
conditions for not practicing accountability.
Temporarily suspending conversation to get
something more important accomplished
might be considered reasonable – as long as
this suspension is temporary and mutually
consented to. Entrapment of one by another
– threads of exclusion from a conversation,
induction of fear of retribution, and exercis-
ing authority – is always unfortunate because
acquiescence inevitably creates burdensome

interpersonal relationships that are incompatible with authentic conversation. The unwillingness to repair problematic conversations is the root cause of conversations descending into other forms of interaction, as I shall exemplify below. The results of such degenerations are where conventional sociological abstractions start – without adequate reflection on their roots in conversations.

There are innumerable many ways a conversation can degenerate into other forms of social interactions. I can offer only a few examples.

Physical constraints

The most benign and not entirely social in nature are physical constraints. Conversations become increasingly difficult when noise competes with participants' ability to listen to each other's voices, or when the number of participants grows too large for speakers to address individual participants or to distinguish individual voices, for example at mass rallies, political demonstrations, or public performances. In such situations, participants acquire collective identities that divide participants into, say, performers and audiences or demonstrators and police.

Dialogical inequalities

Most obviously, authentic conversation degenerates by tolerating dialogical inequalities. Interruptions of a speaker's turn can happen carelessly, but they also may be part of accepted discourse practices. For example, it is well known that men interrupt women more often than the reverse. Numerous explanations have been suggested, including a prevailing acceptance of patriarchy. More clearly explainable dialogical inequalities occur at board meetings. Authentic conversation among equals disappears as soon as the CEO or a person in charge of the meeting enters. Such situations are often explained in terms of unequal distribution of power. Power, however, is not what superiors have and subordinates lack. It is not measurable by unequal access to material resources but manifests itself in the unwillingness to hold authorities accountable for what they say or do, and, its complement, in the refusal to provide accounts when requested (Krippendorff 2009: 131–155). Power arises when accountability is not exercised and subsequent interactions are tolerated.

Therapists have sometimes been characterized as conversation managers, which makes therapy different from conversation. Managing focus groups or group discussions, for example, by instructing participants to list their ideas on a predefined issue, putting them on public display, and then proceeding to group them gives the impression of dialogic equality by granting every participant a voice while leaving the moderator in charge of the process. Widely practiced in marketing research and used as a qualitative method for generating data in the social sciences, such methods elicit information that is biased by the management of the group's interactions, revealing something very different from what people would express in unconstrained conversations.

Inauthentic questions

I suggested that asking questions with unknown answers creates possibilities for participants to choose their contributions and experience respect when their answers are acknowledged by responding to them. But questions may be inauthentic as well. Knowledge tests, for example, whether administered in educational settings, aptitude tests for hiring employees, or scientific research, are not geared to understanding but to establishing a respondent's comprehension, the criteria for which reside in the questioner. Asking questions to which the answers are known is consistent with conceptualizing communication as the accurate transmission of information from one mind to another – a process that is institutionalized in many educational and administrative situations that have nothing to do with conversation.

In public opinion research, interviewees are asked to commit themselves to answer an interviewer's questions, and to give up their conversationally expected ability to ask questions of their own. In this genre of social research, questions are standardized for all interviewees, asked according to a schedule, and a prepared set of answers conforms to the interest to the sponsors of the research. Whatever results from such interviews has less to do with what people would say to each other than with what sponsors want to hear (Krippendorff 2005) – a seriously biased investigative technique. Talk show hosts on radio or television are notoriously in charge of what counts as appropriate to the institutionalized genre

they enact. They define the topic, ask the questions, interrupt as they see fit, including signaling the audience to applaud. Talk show guests tend to go along with these inauthenticities for the publicity this affords them on a show.

Institutionalized interactions

Mariaelena Bartesaghi (2009a), studying therapists' use of questions during therapeutic sessions, found less obvious inauthenticities. The therapeutic use of questions may give clients the impression that the therapist is genuinely interested in their problems, but systematically directs the clients' answers to where therapists wants to go with them. She defines therapy as an institutionalized form of interaction. Therapy includes avoiding answering clients' questions, for instance: Client: "Why can't I see you on Monday?" Therapist: "That seems to disturb you, doesn't it?" (Lakoff 1990: 69).

Referring to participants in terms of stereotypical categories

When addressing each other or some participants in social categories, for example, as a (typical) woman, black, Frenchman, gay, mental patient, catholic, or consumer, the ensuing interaction is no longer among mutually respecting individuals but between social categories in terms of which participants are expected to reply. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) discuss these social categories as "typifications." It would be difficult to hold categories accountable for what their members say and do. Similarly, when participants in conversations come to divide themselves into opposing camps with ideological, party political, or ethnic labels, for example, into progressive and conservative politicians, often resulting in the use of plural pronouns – the inclusive "we" and the exclusive "they" – communication becomes interactions among publically identified collectivities and conversation is, at best, a wrong metaphor. Party politics attests to perfectly reasonable individuals adopting ideological voices.

Even deliberately avoiding public stereotypes can degrade authentic conversation. John Jackson (2008) explores the unintended consequences of political correctness in the United States. By confining the use of racial stereotypes to conversations in the privacy of

01 one's home, public discourse becomes disin-
02 genuous and the realities it constructs schizo-
03 phrenic, not resolving the racial tension that
04 political correctness was thought to alleviate.
05 This phenomenon also exemplifies how the
06 invocation of normative theories about
07 proper talk in public can destroy the authen-
08 ticity of conversation.

09 **Institutionalizing reality**

10 Bartesaghi (2009b) identifies several strate-
11 gies that therapists apply to *establish their*
12 *authority vis-à-vis* their clients. Some
13 authority is already presupposed in the very
14 act of clients seeking therapeutic advice. But
15 in therapy sessions, this authority needs to be
16 realized in talk. Therapeutic authority
17 derives largely from using a vocabulary that
18 is institutionalized in therapeutic discourse
19 in which therapists claim expertise. Thera-
20 pists are trained to reframe clients' personal
21 narratives in professional terms, construct-
22 ing a psychotherapeutic reality for them that
23 therapists can treat with the institutional
24 resources they command and clients lack.
25 This practice renders clients as incompetent
26 narrators of their own world. Bartesaghi
27 made three important observations. (1) The
28 therapists she observed managed to prevent
29 being held accountable to their clients by hid-
30 ing behind the professional community of
31 therapists, referring to themselves in terms of
32 the collective "we," having "years of experi-
33 ence," and professional affiliations. That
34 community is physically absent from the
35 therapeutic session. Channeled into the con-
36 versation by the therapist leaves the client no
37 chance to address that community directly.
38 (2) By applying institutionally established
39 therapeutic theories to the social life of cli-
40 ents – theories of the clients' mental and
41 emotional states that they are not expected to
42 know – client accounts are rendered unreli-
43 able or flawed. This gives therapists (3) the
44 justification for *replacing clients' narratives,*
45 *feelings, and social problems with institutional*
46 *accounts* that enable treating clients as indi-
47 viduals by therapeutic means.

48 Therapeutic discourse is not the only dis-
49 course that constructs *institutional realities*
50 that clients are asked to accept on the thera-
51 pists' authority and with their help. Scien-
52 tists, too, tend to claim possession of the
53 instruments for establishing objective truths,
54 realities that laypersons must accept on

account of the scientific authority articulat-
ing their truths. Teachers assume their
authority vis-à-vis their students by claiming
to have valuable knowledge that students
need to acquire. Literary scholars presume
the ability to interpret texts in ways that
untrained readers cannot and authors may
not be aware of. For example, Paul Ricoeur's
(1970) "hermeneutic of suspicion" insists on
characterizing authors as hiding their agenda
behind their writing, which has given literary
scholars the professional license to construct
what could underlie a text regardless of what
its author says it means. In effect, this schol-
arship thrives on institutionalizing what has
been called "conspiracy theory." It permits
scholars to not listen to how others – readers
and authors – interpret the text they are ana-
lyzing. Conspirators must, by definition,
deny being one. It follows that an author's
denial of the suspected intentions can be
interpreted as evidence for the validity of the
suspicion – a cognitive trap. One cannot con-
verse with institutionalized realities, only
with people willing to consider them as mere
hypotheses, which is what social constructiv-
ism advocates.

Not confining accountability to those
present in conversations is a premise of socio-
logical theorizing. Besides what I mentioned
above, there are at least three ways this can
happen and it would be important to recog-
nize the linguistic ground, as Habermas
(2001) does, that makes sociology possible.

35 **Speaking for absent others**

36 When therapists rearticulate their client's
37 stories in therapeutic terms, therapists and
38 clients are at least co-present. It is conceiv-
39 able; therefore, that they could hold each
40 other accountable should the evolving con-
41 versation go astray. Even institutionalized
42 realities can be contested, although I am told
43 that clients in therapy rarely ever do this in
44 their sessions, which is not to rule out the
45 possibility of expressing their misgivings in
46 conversations with trusted friends. However,
47 when speaking for absent others, speakers
48 usurp the voices of individuals who, perhaps
49 conveniently excluded from a conversation,
50 can neither be questioned within that con-
51 versation nor be held accountable for their
52 views as channeled into a conversation by one
53 participant. Noble intents notwithstanding,
54 speaking for the poor, oppressed, minorities,

55 victims of crime, or even for familiar
acquaintances is a discourse strategy in which
speakers claim to have more voices than their
own. When compellingly asserted, this gives
speakers rhetorical strengths over those who
cannot claim such backing. Reporting
rumors or something overheard may not
have much weight, but claiming to speak for
one's boss during a contentious meeting can
convert a conversation among equals into a
game of usurped, claimed, perhaps invented
voices, which is no longer between authentic
participants.

14 **Speaking as representatives of others**

15 I.e., individuals, organizations, movements,
16 or governments. Lawyers represent their cli-
17 ents in court mainly because untrained indi-
18 viduals believe they do not have the know-
19 how to navigate themselves through the legal
20 system. In taking on a case, lawyers translate
21 their client's stories into legally valid narra-
22 tives that a court is designed to handle and to
23 which clients are asked to submit for fear of
24 failing. In this process, clients become legal
25 categories – plaintiffs, defendants, or wit-
26 nesses – whose roles are circumscribed by
27 being treated as their category and forced to
28 respond accordingly. Politicians in demo-
29 cratic governments often face the difficult
30 choice between speaking their conscience or
31 in the name of the constituencies that elected
32 them. The latter has the advantage of giving
33 those with larger constituencies more clout
34 and allows them to defer voting until after
35 consulting with their constituency. In all of
36 these cases, interactions are constrained by
37 the process of representation. Therefore, a
38 parliament is not a place for conversations
39 but for institutionalized debates, public pos-
40 turing, behind door negotiations, compro-
41 mises, and voting in the name of absent oth-
42 ers.

43 **Speaking as the occupant of an office**

44 In social organizations, members are
45 assigned to offices that serve particular func-
46 tions with responsibilities for coordinating
47 the work of subordinates. Occupants of an
48 office dedicate all communications to the
49 purpose of that office, speak from that posi-
50 tion, not for themselves, and expect all sub-
51 ordinates to be accountable to them without
52 challenging their office. The transitivity of
53 such asymmetrical accounting practices cre-

THE AUTHOR



Klaus Krippendorff is the Gregory Bateson Professor for Cybernetics, Language, and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. He holds a Ph.D. in communication from the University of Illinois, where he studied with W. Ross Ashby, and a graduate degree in design from the avant-garde, now defunct, Hochschule für Gestaltung, Ulm. He is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the International Communication Association, the East-West Center in Hawaii, and Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies. He is a Past President of the International Communication Association, founder of the International Federation of Communication Associations, and active in the American Society for Cybernetics. Krippendorff has published over 100 journal articles and several books on communication, social science methodology, system theory, cybernetics, and design. Among his books are *The Analysis of Communication Content* (co-ed.); *Information Theory; Content Analysis* (translated into several languages); *Communication and Control in Society* (ed.); *A Dictionary of Cybernetics; Design in the Age of Information* (ed.); *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design; The Content Analysis Reader* (co-ed.); and *On Communicating, Otherness, Meaning, and Information*. He is currently exploring the role of language in the social construction of selves, others, and social organizations; issues of conceptual entrapment and emancipation; the human use of cyberspace; and the design of future technologies.

ates and maintains organizational hierarchies, such as in business, government, the military, and even the Catholic Church. Office holders are not addressed as individuals, as would be expected in conversations, but as part of a hierarchy of which that office is a part. Such hierarchies tend to be described in terms of power relations. Through such transitively unequal accounting practices, intra-organizational interactions are coordinated and directed towards organizational goals. Thus, organizational communication deviates markedly from the mutual accountability in conversations and therefore deserves special attention. In the social sciences, that attention largely comes from sociology, which rarely acknowledges how organizational realities are reconstituted by actors (Krippendorff 2008b) and maintained in communication.

Discourse as constrained conversation

I use “discourse” to describe what conversations can become when untoward conversational moves are not accounted for or repaired. Discourse surfaces when interactions become systematized, organized, institutionalized, and no longer open to everything its participants may have to say; when dialogical equality is replaced by asymmetrical communications; when the insistence on consistencies constrains the creativities that authentic conversations afford their participants; and when self-organization (communicational closure) is replaced by hierarchies of asymmetrical accounting practices outside the present interactions. Elsewhere, I have written about “discourse as systematically constrained conversation” (Krippendorff 2009: 217–236) of which I can outline here only its principal features.

To be clear, when saying that conversation descends, degenerates, or erodes into discourse, I do not wish to imply that discourse is an undesirable form of languaging. We know many discourses that have made contemporary society more livable. We have reasons to be proud of scientific discourse, public discourse, legal discourse, design discourse, and the discourse of cybernetics (Krippendorff 2008c), to name but a few. While these discourses can be enormously

productive, I do suggest that conversations open spaces for people to realize each other as human beings, that conversational competencies precede discursive practices developmentally (children need to acquire conversational competencies before becoming competent in a particular discourse), etymologically (the vocabularies of discourses tend to go back to generations of speakers), and epistemologically (personal experiences that enter conversations may become displaced by discursive constructions of reality). Therefore conversation should not be ignored when theorizing human communication in general and human participation in social organizations (Krippendorff 2008b), science, and culture, in particular.

According to earlier distinctions, there are five constitutive features of discourse.

■ *Discourses surface in the artifacts they construct*, including the body of their texts. The discourse of physics constructs a logically consistent universe amenable to observation and causal explanations; that of medicine, one of diseased or debilitated human bodies open to cures or surgical interventions; that of design, one of future technologies of everyday life. Discourse-specific vocabularies are standardized building blocks for constructing such artifacts. The body of artifacts that a discourse attends to needs to remain open to rearticulation, recombination, and creative extensions, or else the discourse dies for lack of space. Traditional discourse analysts limit their attention to available texts. I maintain this to be insufficient. Texts are read and embedded in talk among particular people and acted upon. The artifacts that discourses generate include all of their visible and somewhat enduring manifestations, not just texts but also discourse-specific universes, professional practices, and technologies. These artifacts are co-constructed in interpersonal interactions, which, while inconceivable without individual cognition are not intelligible in terms of cognitive processes.

However, unlike the traditional emphasis of discourse analysis, these artifacts alone are not sufficient for understanding the operation of a discourse; hence there are four additional features of discourse.

■ *Discourses are kept alive within a community of their practitioners*. Texts need to be read, reread, reinterpreted, reconstructed, and updated by members of a discourse com-

01 munity specializing in that practice. Texts
02 have no meaning without readers and the
03 artifacts of a discourse are rendered meaning-
04 ful primarily by the members of a discourse
05 community that has created and used them in
06 their midst as well as by users outside the dis-
07 course. A discourse community is self-orga-
08 nizing by legitimizing its own practices,
09 including creating and maintaining stan-
10 dards for reading, writing, interpretation, and
11 construction of their own realities, conditions
12 for membership in the discourse community,
13 and criteria for attributing meanings to the
14 activities of its members. For example, the
15 medical discourse community trains future
16 members, certifies its practitioners, deter-
17 mines codes of conduct and defines the crite-
18 ria for good medical research. All discourse
19 communities are autonomous and pursue
20 their distinct identities.

21 ■ *Discourses institute their recurrent prac-*
22 *tices.* This is to say that discourse-specific
23 practices – courses of education, applicable
24 methods and techniques, media of publica-
25 tions, awards for outstanding accomplish-
26 ments, etc. – are codified, institutionalized,
27 and maintained as the preferred practices of
28 members of the discourse community and
29 maintained in the name of that community.
30 Social science publications, for example, are
31 carefully evaluated by editors and reviewers,
32 encourage a common vocabulary, allow
33 younger members to qualify for promotion,
34 and assure the efficiency of constructing dis-
35 cursive artifacts. Theorists refer to their pre-
36 decessors, research methods build on each
37 other, intervention strategies are improved
38 over time – all of which contribute to an insti-
39 tutionalized history of discourse practices,
40 which has the benefit of avoiding the duplica-
41 tion of innovations, standardizes methods,
42 typifies expertise, and thus serves to make the
43 discourse more efficient.

44 ■ *Discourses draw their own boundaries,*
45 *deciding who and what belongs and what*
46 *does not.* Some discourses identify them-
47 selves by reference to the construction of a
48 particular class of artifacts – biologists, for
49 example, are concerned with what they con-
50 struct as living organisms; others are commit-
51 ted to applying particular theories – physi-
52 cists, for example, are committed to causal
53 explanations and the construction of a consis-
54 tent universe; still others are dedicated to
55 solve particular problems – engineering, for

example, seeking technological solutions to
all kinds of problems, including social ones.

■ *Discourses justify their practices to out-*
siders. Justifications may be motivated by the
need to continually recruit new members for
the discourse community to remain viable,
mobilize the resources necessary to construct
their artifacts and promote their use by oth-
ers. But justifications also provide the per-
haps unintended ground for driving various
discourse dynamics. One may note dis-
courses that compete with one another, as
science and religion did until the discourse of
religion found a niche that resists scientific
penetration. Some discourses consider
themselves foundationalist, such as physics
claiming that everything real is physical in
nature and everything else is inferior science
or fiction. Some discourses colonize others,
as cognitive science has been doing lately to
psychology.

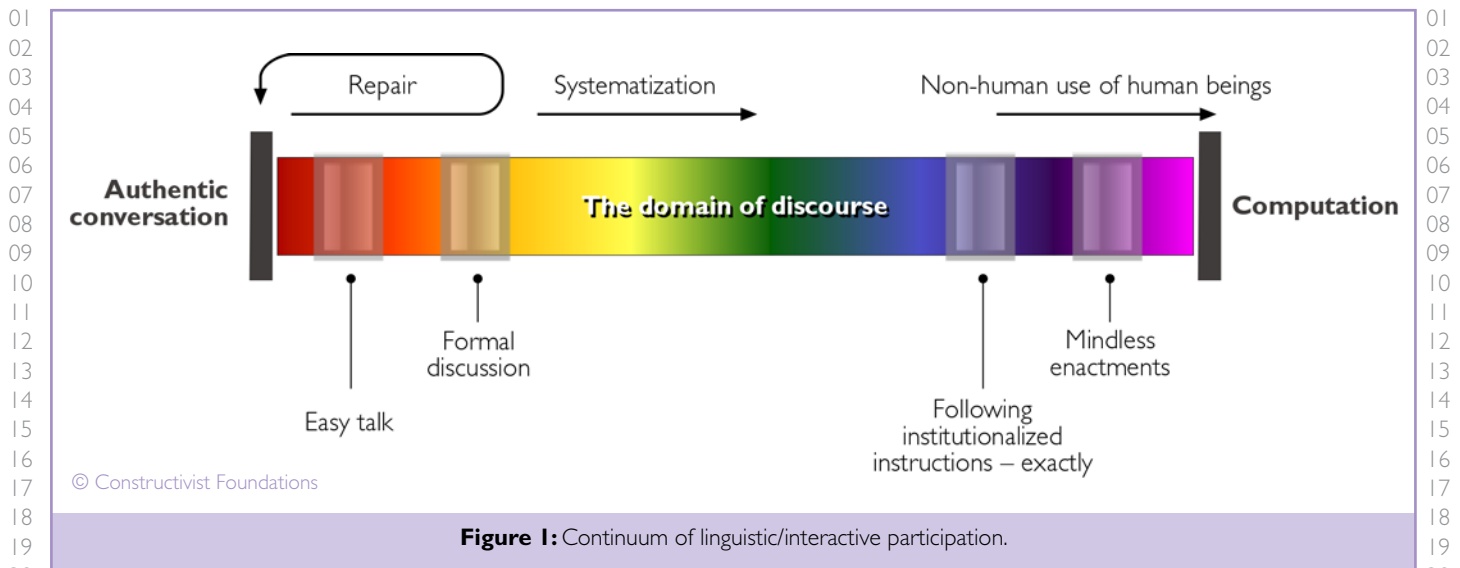
Computation

If discourse emerges when constraints on
authentic conversation are naturalized, talk
becomes institutionalized, and unequal
accounting practices are accepted and
directed to the construction of discursive arti-
facts, then the implementation of technologi-
cal solutions to social problems or the
replacement of social practices by more effi-
cient mechanisms can be considered a move
from discourse to the entirely non-linguistic
processes of *computation*. Today, we are wit-
nessing the massive translation of discursive
practices into efficient computational mecha-
nisms: delegating repetitive work to robotic
devices, searching for relevant texts on the
internet with search engines, scheduling air-
plane traffic, letting computers buy and sell
stocks, using online accounting for the essen-
tial variables of social organizations, and
automating whole businesses. In the same
way, statistical software in the social sciences
has replaced seemingly endless and error
prone hand calculations by teams of research-
ers, and electronic banking accomplishes
what a social network of coordinated bank
employees did before the advent of comput-
ers. These replacements are driven by the
increasing availability of software, discursi-
vely developed by armies of collaborating
programmers.

Software is written in a computer lan- 01
guage and explicates algorithms, i.e., step-by- 02
step instructions in which all conceivable 03
paths are anticipated and by means of which 04
receptive hardware can be programmed to be 05
a purposefully functioning machine. Much 06
like in discourse, where it does not matter 07
who practices it as long as someone does, 08
computation is not tied to particular material 09
manifestations as long as it works. In other 10
words, the material makeup of hardware is 11
irrelevant to its proceeding from state to state 12
in a determinist fashion. Hence, software 13
specifies a deterministic process, rendering 14
computers deterministic machines that can- 15
not choose what they do. They have no 16
agency. Non-digital technologies – simple 17
tools, cars, hospitals, public performances – 18
may not be programmable as computers are, 19
but their design has always focused on how 20
they go from here to there, what, in the digital 21
world, is called “computation,” hence my use 22
of this term. 23

All conversations, discourses, and compu- 24
tations produce something. The products of 25
conversations and discourses are still coordi- 26
nated by talk, text, and interactions. Compu- 27
tations, however, once initiated by human 28
actors, run their course unless intervened 29
with at their interfaces. People may blindly 30
accept the results of computations and allow 31
themselves to be affected by these devices, but 32
this is a user’s choice, not a necessity. 33

Because of the difficulty of grasping the 34
complexities of computational devices, we 35
often attribute human qualities to them – 36
intelligence, temperaments, likes and dis- 37
likes (Turkle 1984, 2007; Reeves & Nass 38
1996), and the ability to act (Latour 2005). 39
However, such attributions do not change 40
the deterministic nature of computational 41
artifacts. One cannot hold computers 42
accountable for what they do. Therefore, 43
replacing discursive practices with computa- 44
tional technologies and relying on them in 45
everyday life amounts to a fundamental shift 46
away from human participation. It is truly 47
amazing to realize how many discourses 48
depend on digitally mediated communica- 49
tion and computation and how little the 50
social sciences have conceptualized this fact 51
of social life or how they have confused the 52
two as Latour (2005) does. Here, cybernetics 53
has much to explore and many insights to 54
offer. 55



Conclusion

To sum up, Figure 1 depicts a continuum between the extremes of authentic conversation and computation, populated by discourse formations of varying degrees of rigor. Conversational competencies include, as I suggested, the ability to repair untoward moves that speakers may make, which can bring discourses back to conversations and the latter to authentic ones. But by not repairing problematic encounters when they occur, by consenting to limit accountability for problematic actions, conversations unwittingly drift into discursive forms that may well construct realities of a kind that conversations cannot construct – think of sophisticated information systems, highways, and the infrastructure of cities. The evolution of such artifacts is accomplished by discourses that coordinate large numbers of human participants, including over some time. It follows that social artifacts of such complexity cannot possibly be explained by the cognitive constructions of an observer or of any one of its constituent creators, users, or stakeholders. What participants do know is their own creative but always only partial contributions. The remainder consists of trust in the linguistic competence of the other participants to coordinate their understanding and interact towards what is to be done. In the transition from conversation to discourse, conversational possibilities are traded for practical

conveniences. In the transition from discourse to computation, seemingly costly, unpleasant, or inefficient discursive practices are implemented in mechanisms whose ultimate consequences may be difficult to foresee.

I am suggesting that the move from conversation through the large domain of discursive forms is attracted by the ultimate temptation of turning social processes into productive algorithms whose operation in various technologies is no longer social, except before their inception and subsequently, at occasional interventions through multi-user interfaces with them. Since computational artifacts often are beyond individual understanding of how they work, such technologies can no longer be treated as tools under rational control of their creators and users. Uncritical reliance on computation can lead communities into unintended realities that may well become unbearable to live in and therefore constitute an important domain of scholarly and designerly attention.

This essay is intended to expand the limits of radical cognitive constructivism, which confines itself to individual understanding, into the social domain, and introduce doubts in the epistemological position of observers at the expense of participatory and interactive reality constructions. I maintain that human realities, including the idea of cognition, are conversational or discursive realities in the sense that we humans interactively participate in their construction – without being in

charge or fully cognizant of each other's conceptions, except for our contribution to them.

I hope that readers of this essay consider conversation – not individual cognition and efforts to describe one's observations – as the essentially human way of living together. Following from that, is the awareness of the often casually accepted drift from conversation through various discursive forms to computation. I invite readers to draw finer distinctions within the domain of discourses and reflect on how their own contributions affect the spaces left to exercise accountability along this sometimes appealing journey. Although computation deserves more attention than I could devote here, it should be recognizable as that which early cybernetics thrived on and proposed in the form of theories, models, and mechanisms for augmenting social reality. Computation undoubtedly has vastly expanded the horizon of our abilities, but it can also constrain human agency. When moving through various discourses, converting recurrent social practices into computational artifacts, we should always preserve the possibility of returning to authentic conversation, its sheer pleasure and fundamental humanness.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful for constructive comments by two reviewers, Mariaelena Bartesaghi, and an unidentified one.

References

- 01 **References** 01
- 02 02
- 03 Antaki C. (2006) Producing a cognition. *Dis-* 03
 04 *course Studies* 8(1): 9–15. 04
- 05 Austin J. L. (1962) How to do things with 05
 06 words. Edited by J. O. Urmson. Oxford 06
 07 University Press, New York. 07
- 08 Bartesaghi M. (2009a) Conversation and psy- 08
 09 chotherapy: How questioning reveals 09
 10 institutional answers. *Discourse Studies* 10
 11 11(2): 153–177. 11
- 12 Bartesaghi M. (2009b) How the therapist 12
 13 does authority: Six strategies for substitut- 13
 14 ing client accounts in the session. *Com-* 14
 15 *munication & Medicine* 6(1): 15–26. 15
- 16 Berger P. L. & Luckmann T. (1966) The social 16
 17 construction of reality: A treatise on the 17
 18 sociology of knowledge. Doubleday, Gar- 18
 19 den City NY. 19
- 20 Billig M. (2009) A psychoanalytic discursive 20
 21 psychology: From consciousness to 21
 22 unconsciousness. *Discourse Studies* 8(1): 22
 23 17–24. 23
- 24 Brown P. & Levinson S. (1987) Politeness: 24
 25 Some universals in language usage. Cam- 25
 26 bridge University Press, Cambridge. 26
- 27 Buttny R. (1993) Social accountability in 27
 28 communication. Sage, Newbury Park CA. 28
- 29 Foerster H. von (1981) Observing systems. 29
 30 Intersystems Publications, Seaside CA. 30
- 31 Gergen K. J. (1994) Realities and relation- 31
 32 ships: Soundings in social construction. 32
 33 Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA. 33
- 34 Glasersfeld E. von (2008) Who conceives of 34
 35 society? *Constructivist Foundations* 3(2): 35
 36 59–64. 36
- 37 Goffman E. (1976) Replies and responses. 37
 38 *Language and Society* 5: 257–313. 38
- 39 Goodwin C. (1981) Conversational organiza- 39
 40 tion. *Interactions between speakers and* 40
 41 *hearers*. Academic Press, New York. 41
- 42 Grice H. P. (1975) Logic and conversation. In: 42
 43 Cole P. & Morgan J. L. (eds.) *Syntax and* 43
 44 *semantics*. Volume 3, *Speech Acts*. New 44
 45 York: Academic Press: 41–58. 45
- 46 Grice H. P. (1978) Further notes on logic and 46
 47 conversation. In: Cole P. (ed.) *Syntax and* 47
 48 *semantics*. Volume 9, *Pragmatics*. New 48
 49 York: Academic Press: 113–128. 49
- 50 Habermas J. (1970) Towards a theory of com- 50
 51 municative competence. *Inquiry* 13: 360– 51
 52 375. 52
- 53 Habermas J. (2001) Universal pragmatics: 53
 54 Reflections on a theory of communicative 54
 55 competence. In: *On the Pragmatics of* 55
Social Interaction (Translated by B. Fult-
 56 ner). MIT Press, Cambridge MA: 67–84.
- Krippendorff K. (2005) The social construc-
 57 tion of public opinion. In: Wienand E.,
 58 Westerbarkey J. & Scholl A. (eds.) *Kom-*
 59 *munikation über Kommunikation*. Theorie,
 60 Methoden und Praxis. VS-Verlag,
 61 Wiesbaden: 129–149. Retrieved from
 62 [http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/](http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/75/)
 63 [75/](http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/75/) on 15 June 2009.
- Krippendorff K. (2008a) Towards a radically
 64 social constructivism. *Constructivist*
 65 *Foundations* 3(2): 91–94.
- Krippendorff K. (2008b) Social organizations
 66 as reconstitutable networks of conversa-
 67 tion. *Cybernetics and Human Knowledge*
 68 15(3–4): 149–161.
- Krippendorff K. (2008c) Cybernetics's reflex-
 69 ive turn. *Cybernetics and Human Knowl-*
 70 *edge* 15(3–4): 173–184.
- Krippendorff K. (2009) On communicating:
 71 Otherness, meaning, and information.
 72 Edited by Fernando Bermejo. Routledge,
 73 New York.
- Lakoff R. T. (1990) Talking power. The poli-
 74 tics of language in our lives. Basic Books,
 75 New York.
- Latour B. (2005) Reassembling the social: An
 76 introduction to actor-network-theory.
 77 Oxford University Press, New York.
- Maturana H. R. (1988) Ontology of observ-
 78 ing. In: *Texts in Cybernetics*. American
 79 Society for Cybernetics Conference Work-
 80 book, Felton CA. Retrieved from [http://](http://www.inteco.cl/biology/ontology/)
 81 www.inteco.cl/biology/ontology/ on 15
 82 June 2009.
- Maturana H. R. & Varela F. J. (1987) The tree
 83 of knowledge. Shambhala, Boston MA.
- Maturana H. R. & Varela F. J. (1980) Auto-
 84 poiesis and cognition. The realization of
 85 the living. Reidel, Dordrecht.
- Mills C. W. (1940) Situated actions and
 86 vocabularies of motive. *American Socio-*
 87 *logical Review* 5: 904–913.
- Nofsinger R. E. (1999) Everyday conversa-
 88 tion. Waveland Press, Prospect Heights IL. 01
 89 Oxford English Dictionary (1991) The com- 02
 90 pact and second edition. Oxford Univer- 03
 91 sity Press, New York. 04
- Pask G. (1975) Conversation, cognition, and 05
 92 learning. Elsevier, New York. 06
- Pask G. (1976) Conversation theory: Applica- 07
 93 tions in education and epistemology. 08
 94 Elsevier, New York. 09
- Reeves B. & Nass C. (1996) The media equa- 10
 95 tion: How people treat computers, televi- 11
 96 sion, and new media like real people and 12
 97 places. Cambridge University Press, New 13
 98 York. 14
- Ricoeur P. (1970) Freud and philosophy. An 15
 99 essay on interpretation (Translated by 16
 100 Denis Savage). Yale University Press, New 17
 101 Haven CT. 18
- Saussure F. de (1916) *Cours de Linguistique* 19
 102 *Générale*. English translation (1959) 20
 103 *Course in general linguistics* (Translated 21
 104 by Wade Baskin). Philosophical Library, 22
 105 New York. 23
- Scott M. B. & Lyman S. M. (1968) Accounts. 24
 106 *American Sociological Review* 33: 46–62. 25
- Schulte J. (1992) Wittgenstein. An introduc- 26
 107 tion. SUNY Press, New York. 27
- Searle J. R. (1969) *Speech acts: An essay in the* 28
 108 *philosophy of language*. Cambridge Uni- 29
 109 *versity Press*, London. 30
- Shotter J. (1993) *Conversational realities.* 31
 110 *Constructing life through language*. Sage, 32
 111 Newbury Park CA. 33
- Shotter J. (1984) *Social accountability and* 34
 112 *selfhood*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford. 35
- Turkle S. (1984) *The second self: Computers* 36
 113 *and the human spirit*. Simon and Schuster, 37
 114 New York. 38
- Turkle S. (ed.) (2007) *Evocative objects:* 39
 115 *Things we think with*. MIT Press, Cam- 40
 116 *bridge MA*. 41
- Volosinov V. N. (1986) *Marxism and the phi-* 42
 117 *losophy of language*. Harvard University 43
 118 *Press*, Cambridge MA. 44
- Wittgenstein L. (1953) *Philosophical investi-* 45
 119 *gations*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford. 46
 120 47
 121 48
 122 49
 123 50
 124 51
 125 52
 126 53
 127 54
 128 55

Received: 29 April 2009

Accepted: 26 June 2009