



'Co-alienation' mediated by common representations in synchronous e-discussions

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ABSTRACT

Synchronous e-discussions have become common social practices in and out of educational institutions. In comparison with face-to-face dialogs, synchronous discussions seem less propitious for learning. Yet, this social practice is extremely popular. Socio-cultural psychologists have suggested that intersubjectivity is central for maintenance of communication and for productive interaction in face-to-face social practices. In this paper we study how communication is maintained in synchronous discussions and whether intersubjectivity is reached in those discussions. Four university students used a CMC tool to discuss an educational issue on learning, teaching and moderation. One week after the discussion, each student was interviewed on his/her views on learning, teaching and moderation. Then, the technique of cued retrospective reporting was used to uncover how each student interpreted each move of the synchronous discussion. The cross analysis of the interviews and the cued retrospective reporting showed that actions were not co-ordinated. Agreements and disagreements were not shared, and the order of actions was quite whimsical. We conclude that intersubjectivity was not established. However, communication was maintained through a process of *co-alienation* – the juxtaposition of incompatible alignments of representations through a common external representation. Although co-alienation is problematic, we show that discussants could learn from the e-discussion.

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Socio-cultural psychologists have studied many social practices that are relevant to learning and development. In these practices, the other is significant: he or she cares before guiding, he or she shares something that fuels productive interaction (Rogoff, 1990). The notion of intersubjectivity was elaborated to account for maintenance of communication in practices that lead to development and learning. The social practices of synchronous (electronic) discussions are newcomers that seem strange to educators or psychologists: People seat alone by their computers and interact with others they don't see and often don't know. The interactions are often lopsided, interrupted and rudimentary. Yet, sometimes, people seem to learn in or from these strange interactions. How can such learning occur? Is it possible to discern any kind of intersubjectivity in synchronous discussions? We approach these questions in this paper. A necessary step in this enterprise is to come back to the origins of intersubjectivity and to the different senses it has received to account for maintenance of communication.

Introduction: Four senses of intersubjectivity to account for maintenance of communication

The historical origins of *intersubjectivity* are philosophical: From Husserl, to Heidegger, Levinas or Gadamer, philosophers have asked the transcendental conditions of the possibility of dialog, of the existence of the other. These philosophical steps led to consider intersubjectivity as an idea that explains how empathy develops between people or how people reach new meanings together. Socio-cultural psychologists adopted this togetherness view of intersubjectivity to become a central idea in their theory of human development. Intersubjectivity was primarily meant to express a general idea of overlapping of subjectivities or *prolepses*

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(Rommetveit, 1979, 1985) – communicative moves speakers take for granted things that not have been (yet) discussed. Even before language is mastered, a baby is born anticipating a sympathetic, interactive social environment, in which he or she will encounter fellow-human loving, care-taking and responsive subjects, available as *companions* in the baby's encounter with the world, interested in the baby's experience and enjoying the baby's responses or sharing his/her fears (Trevarthen, 1993). Another sense of intersubjectivity refers to the construction of a *shared meaning* by people to interpret social and cultural life, or a specific situation. This sense is very frequent in adults' guidance of children's explorations. It has also been adopted to describe some situations of collaboration among peers, for example, when jointly solving problems. A different sense given to intersubjectivity – *shared divergences of meanings*, is necessary to understand how practices such as lying, disputes and jokes “work”. Lying is genuinely inter-subjective as it operates between two subjective definitions of reality. It entails partially shared divergences of meaning: the liar shares with his/her interlocutors the meanings of a situation – divergent for him/her, he/she wants to “share” with them. Disputes are fueled by the common recognition of divergent views on a situation. So far, the senses of intersubjectivity we reviewed have in common the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals, and stress that shared cognition and consensus is essential in the shaping of our ideas and relations.

Still, all of us intuitively know that this communal view does not render the richness of human communication. And indeed, some distanced themselves from the sharing perspective in intersubjectivity presented so far to suggest ideas such as *taken-as-shared beliefs* (Cobb, Stephan, McClain, & Gravemeijer, 2001) to describe communication among children participating in successive social activities designed to promote learning. For Cobb et al. (2001), the term *taken as shared* “...leaves room for the diversity in individual students' ways of participating in these activities” (p. 124). But if these beliefs are, as posited by definition, subjective and not necessarily mutual and not shared by the community, how various social activities in which divergent views emerge may lead to new understandings, to new meanings? If Cobb is right, then he leaves room for diversity but also for mystery, as it is difficult to understand how communication can be maintained when nothing is necessarily shared. An additional sense of the notion of intersubjectivity was necessary. To make clear this sense, Matusov (1996) observed a succession of discussions on play craft among elementary school children mediated by a teacher. Matusov showed that in the disagreements some students raised no idea or no opposition to any idea. Rather, although a fierce disagreement arose among children, the disagreement for some turned around ownership of the play crafted while the other students thought it was motivated by a better play craft. Matusov concluded that a new sense of intersubjectivity should be elaborated, a process of *coordination of participants' contributions in joint activity*. For Matusov, not only agreement, but disagreement is at the basis of social activities if it is shared (and in this sense, it differs from Cobb's stance). Matusov gives examples for which understandings emerge from the coordination of contributions without any common belief. In those cases, an observer can extract from the social activity a thread of compatibility of actions, that is, an interpretation encompassing the goals of each participant, and which is coherent. In Matusov's terms, “The participatory notion of intersubjectivity as a coordination of individual contributions to the joint activity allows researchers to incorporate both participants' understandings and misunderstandings of each other, and their similarities and differences as the participants are simultaneously in agreement and in disagreement” (p. 29). Matusov considered other situations in which meaningful communication can be maintained – situations in which teachers or students care for others and help them understand, develop, or own what they already master. Communication in this case is maintained but calls for another sense of intersubjectivity, that of *agency* to features concerns by teachers (or students) that are shared by the ones about which they care (Matusov, 2001).

So far, among the senses given to intersubjectivity, the sharing senses do not seem to fit the experience we all have of synchronous discussions. Rather, the incorporation of compatible contributions/actions, compatibility being defined by the coordination of actions undertaken by the participants reflects more synchronous discussions. A different research direction done in linguistics may constitute a first step in studying how communication is maintained in synchronous discussion: Linguistics studies have recognized the role of *grounding* in attaining mutual understanding of utterances through coordination (Clark, 1994; Clark & Schaefer, 1989). The maintenance of common ground is done at different levels. It arises from *contact* (whether the interlocutor is willing and able to continue the interaction); *perception* (whether the interlocutor is willing and able to perceive the message); *understanding* (whether the interlocutor is willing and able to understand the message); *attitudinal reaction* (whether the interlocutor is willing and able to react and adequately respond to the message, specifically whether s/he accepts or rejects it). For Clark, grounding cannot be undertaken through isolated utterances but through patterns of interactions: for example, *contact* is maintained through a three-turn pattern between discussants: one posts a message, the other acknowledges his/her attendance, and the first continues. Baker and his colleagues (Baker, Hansen, Joiner, & Traum, 1998; Baker, Hansen, Joiner, & Traum, 1999) have related this tradition with the socio-cultural historical tradition and identified in grounding a basic mechanism that enables collaborative learning and establishes intersubjectivity as a process of coordination of participants' contribution in joint activity: Learning from grounding – collaborative learning – can be viewed as appropriation of semiotic tools, mediated by those very tools. Appropriation of cognitive tools can be viewed as a gradual transition from pragmatic level grounding – learning to understand each other, to collaborate – towards learning to understand the semiotic tools in a specific domain (that may also be languages themselves) (Baker et al., 1999).

The studies mentioned above on the different types of intersubjectivity involved face-to-face communication. The studies done on the role of grounding in establishing intersubjectivity involved face-to-face or a-synchronous communication. The diversity of communication practices grows extremely rapidly, as various forms of e-discussions gain popularity. For those practices, especially for some cases of e-discussion, we will argue that grounding might be questionable if we view intersubjectivity as the coordination of contributions in joint activity. We will also show that the sense of intersubjectivity as sharing of subjective states among several individuals, cannot be retained for certain synchronous discussions. The question is then how communication is maintained? And is it

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