

## **The ethics of praxis is the praxis of ethics**

In this section, I present a fragment from a classroom episode<sup>1</sup> to show that students and teachers do not just *take* responsibility but that they always already find themselves in a relation of responsibility and that each participant is answerable for the other. In analyzing the fragment, I am interested in getting the perspectives of the participants in and on the conversation. This requires me to listen to next speaker in whose locution we find reflected not only the understanding of the preceding speaker but also its “social evaluation” (Bakhtine [Volochinov], 1977).<sup>2</sup> In this sense, every act of speech is a response, even the solitary one, and therefore does not begin knowing and learning (Chrétien, 2007) – as constructivists want to have it. Because we are interested here in ethics as it arises from the inner forces that move this conversation, we have to understand how the participants themselves hear each other rather than imposing our interpretation of what someone has said. Thus, for example, we may not say that one speaker asks a question unless the second speaker treats it as such in his/her turn. This methodical approach analytically implements the contention that “*the nervous center of any utterance, any expression, is not interior but exterior: it is situated in the social milieu that surrounds the individual*” (p. 134). The recipient of a locution co-authors and countersigns it, and is thus as important as the speaker to the development of the *conversation* (Derrida, 1988). To understand the conversation as social situation in a specific societal setting, we therefore do not need to figure out what is in the minds of speakers hidden from view – e.g., their “meanings” – but we need to follow the social milieu that surrounds and comprises our speakers. That is, we have to hear a speaker as the listeners in the situation have heard him/her, which we do by attending to how these listeners make available their hearing to the speaker in their reply.

### *Saying is summoning and questioning*

The fragment derives from a classroom episode in which the fourth-grade students are asked to model a story in which a girl begins with \$3 in her piggybank and adds to it \$6 every week. The students are to arrive at a generalized way for figuring out the total amount so that they can easily predict, without counting out, the amount of money in the piggybank when the number of weeks is very large (e.g., after 117 weeks). The video shows that Aurélie already has abandoned the task and, in apparent frustration, pounds her fist on the desk; and Mario signals that he has difficulties in understanding what he is to do. The fragment picks up after the

---

<sup>1</sup> The 229-line transcription of the entire 12-minute episode is available in the original French and in translation (Roth & Radford, 2011). Minor modifications had to be made, because errors in the original transcription became evident and to appropriately bring into alignment actions and words.

<sup>2</sup> The term locution is used here to denote a moment of the minimal unit of analysis, which, for conversation analysts and Bakhtinian scholars, is the turn pair. There are no implications as to the speech intentions or speech effects.

teacher Jeannie completes an evaluation of an answer by repeating what Thérèse has said and by proffering the first turn to a possible question–answer sequence (turn 069). In this situation, the relation with and to the (generalized) Other, here the students at the group of desks, accomplishes itself in Jeannie’s Saying, oriented toward and therefore *addressing* the children. Jeannie’s locution, addressed to the students, constitutes a summons, for them to take a next turn, and in this turn to produce a reply to what she has said. She does not address the students in the way she would address the mathematics education professor in the room, or some other adult. Rather, she addresses them at what is their presupposed level of understanding – and thereby already has made an ethical commitment even though she might not have thought about her actions in this way. More importantly, the figure of question–response is subordinated to a more fundamental one of summons–response (Chrétien, 2007), this latter, as a fundamental form of the dialogical relation, being more complex than the former (Bakhtine, 1984). The question of addressing the children is more primordial than the solicitation of a specific answer, for the second is impossible if the first condition is not met.

069 J: it EQuals to nine the first week. (0.78) wHY is the thrEE in yellow?  
 whydyou think? ((*Index finger on number in first column*))  
 070 (0.19)  
 071 M: um um, um ((*shrugs shoulders, shakes head “no,” squinting eyes which may  
 be seen a questioning look*))  
 072 (0.20)  
 073 T: <<all>i don[no]>  
 074 M: [be]cause we are supposed to write it?  
 075 (0.44)

A summons is not a summons in and of itself. In praxis, it is a summons only if it is attended to and heard. To hear this summon, the students actually need to listen without knowing “what is coming at them” – which also could be an insult, a hurting remark, or a slur. The children are vulnerable because they cannot know what is coming at them in and with the Saying until it has arrived, that is, when they know what has been said, when the Said is available to them.

This next turn consists of interjections, which Mario accompanies by shaking his head as if signifying “no” (turn 71). Jeannie does not only produce a summons, in her saying she also exposes herself. In producing the locution “why is the three in yellow?” as a candidate question for a question–answer turn, Jeannie in fact exposes herself to possible failure. She does not nor can she know what will come on the part of the students, that is, the social evaluation that completes her locution that transforms the turn pair into an utterance (Bakhtine [Volochinov], 1977). Thérèse says “I donno,” overlapped by Mario, who proffers a possible candidate for a question–answer sequence: “because we are supposed to write it?” (turn 74). That is, as intimated above, it is only through Mario’s reply that we know the effect of Jeannie’s locution. It is through his voice that we come to know what Mario has heard. In this situation, it is a candidate for an answer to a question. But whether it is a legitimate answer we cannot know until we hear Jeannie again, who makes available to us what she heard Mario say. That is, to reply is not only to provide an answer to but also to answer for, a responsibility for the other with regard to the particular hearing of the preceding locution, which completes a sequentially

organized turn pair. It is a responsibility for an inherent and unavoidable irresponsibility that arises from the fact that there is an excess of consequences of the action over any intent (Nietzsche, 1954a). (Transcription conventions are provided in the appendix.)

The intonation is rising toward the end of Mario's locution (turn 74), which makes it possible to hear the locution also as a question. That is, the locution simultaneously is a constative – its grammatical structure makes a statement – and a question – its intonation moves in the way normally associated with questions. It may be heard as a question to Jeannie as much as to himself about the appropriateness of the constative as answer in the question-answer pair that Jeannie has begun. Intonation does not just mark the locution in specific ways, which written language transcribes in the form of punctuation (comma, semicolon, colon, period, question mark, or quotation mark). In living speech, intonation is an integral part and has important functions, as grammatical marker, as expression of social evaluation, and as expression of affect. Indeed, there are strong correlations between prosodic features and psychological states (Scherer, 1989). Intonation and other prosodic features that correlate with emotional states are not produced consciously and often despite the speakers' intentions (e.g., people blush when they talk about something embarrassing or tell a lie). Thus, an *affective* evaluative tone colors the experience in this situation in addition to any cognitive experience that one might detect; the evaluative tone provides testimony rather than cognitive comprehension of what is happening. Such testimony is typical of the witness rather than of the detached and uninvolved theoretical spectator. As witnesses, the participants in this episode are affected in and by a situation even prior to comprehending cognitively the kind of event that we are involved in and what is happening to them.