

# The Reification of Dialogue<sup>1</sup>

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It has been my concern to look closely at conversational dialogues that, to follow Georg Lukács's idea (1922) are "reified" (verdinglicht). The idea behind this goes back to Marx's concept of "alienation" (Entfremdung, 1844) and the "fetish character" (1867) that goods assume under capitalism; or, if you like, even further back to Hegel's use of "Entfremdung", "Entäusserung" (divestiture/alienation) and "Entzweiung" (disunion) between 1807 and 1820, terms he developed to describe the bourgeois society then thrusting upwards. My intention here is to show how communication between people turns on a relationship to things, how such dialogues are affected by the matter-of-fact nature of the world in which we live and so become like things.

If we leave aside branches of linguistics (Schmölders 1979), everyday dialogues have been dealt with ethno-methodological "conversational analysis" (Psathas 1973, Bergmann 1981). The treatment here, however, is tributary to the *heuristic* methods of textual analysis.

The material under examination here is based on eighty-five documented examples of everyday dialogues<sup>2</sup> that, following the rules of heuristic analysis, were recorded by Hamburg students in very distinct situations (at the work place, in public transport, on the street, in dwellings, during family festivities etc.) and have as their object thoroughly diverse themes, such as greeting, quarrelling, imparting information, reacting to appearances, disciplining, shopping, chatting and complaining). The dialogues have their origin in normal, everyday situations in which the observers were "coincidentally" present, but where the observing was nearly always carried out in a concealed manner. The observers were questioned singly and then together on their degree of consistency, and the "replies" examined anew until a complete picture emerged in detail (dialogue principle). The research methods used were textual examination and experimentation.

Heuristic method is intended to reveal the unknown, not to test hypotheses. The supposition about "reification" is not a hypothesis that is to be affirmed or falsified by operations on the research material, but is, on the contrary, a question asked of the texts. Acquaintance with the aforementioned texts motivates the questioning, no more than that.

## I. Examples of reification in dialogues

I shall begin with the analysis of dialogues from which one gains the impression that the course of the conversation was fairly strongly influenced or determined by objects.

### 1. Reification

#### *Dialogue 1*

In the laundry cellar of a dwelling-house, when a female neighbour addresses me.

Her: Oh, you must be Frau Beck?<sup>3</sup>

Me: Yes.

Her: I saw your name in the laundry register.

I take a swift glance past her at the book.

<sup>1</sup> Written in 1990, revised in 1993. First publication in Kleining (1994). pp 230-260.

<sup>2</sup> The dialogues were recorded by: Nicole Beencke, Gotlind Blöker, Barbara Dietrich, Gunther Dietz, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Bendix Harms, Volker Joksch, Gerhard Kleining, Michael Kreibrink, Toralf Krüger, Berenike Metz, Birgit Möbus, Edmund Möller, Gabriele Prävk, Olaf Reinholz, Gaby Seidemann and by one person whose name sadly could no longer be ascertained.

<sup>3</sup> All personal names have been altered.

Me: Yes, then you must be Frau Albert.

Her: How long are you going to be washing for?

Me: About an hour, roughly.

Her: Till ten o'clock, then?

Me: Roughly, yes. The wash doesn't need spin-drying and finally I was wanting to do another wash at 40°C.

Her: I see. I already have my name down in the book...

Frau Albert moves on down the corridor, as she lives in the building next door, at N° 14b, whereas the laundry is at 14c.

The first stage here is establishing the identity of the persons involved: who is who? Frau Albert and Frau Beck both learn each other's names from the laundry register. The information noted down there is then confirmed by both women. The document is found to be correct. The book, however, is a thing and used by people to convey information.

For how long will Frau Beck still be washing? Her utterance "about an hour" is transferred to a time on the clock, and so made firmer: "Till ten o'clock, then?" The hour of day is an "objective" time-reference, binding for both women.

The duration of the wash is determined and legitimised by a "factual" and so an understandable process: spin-drying and the new wash, the 40 C° one. It is, as any housewife or husband knows, a process dependent on the cloth material, printed on the labels sewn on the clothes with their recommendations with regard to washing temperature, spin-drying and ironing that are to be applied in the machine programmes, determining in turn the kind of detergent used and the wash duration and so all the details of the process on pain of shrinking, fading or discolouring if not followed.

A further procedure for the wash entering a name in the register and booking a time, which in turn depends on the nature of the wash, too; what the book says counts.

Common to the "replies" to the "questions" are the identification of the persons, the duration and type of wash regulated by an "objective" process, so there are practical constraints that lead to a matter-of-fact style of conversing. Questions serve to check that the rules are observed, so even though they are addressed to the other person they are really directed towards things. The relationships between things, times and sequences of events may be produced by people but they end up determining the way people behave.

### *Dialogue 2*

A pedestrian precinct filled with shoppers, where two elderly married couples run into each other in the late afternoon. It is essentially the men who talk.

Couple A: Hallo, how's it going?

Couple B: Oh, it goes, got to.. And you?

Couple A: Oh, yes, got to.. Everything jogging along as usual.

Couple B: Well, keep it up!

Couple A: 'Bye.

Couple B: 'Bye

The first question "how's it going?" is answered with "it goes, got to" and then affirmed by the man who asked it with "oh, jogging along". The first couple, who had wanted to know how it was going, can merely produce, when asked about themselves, the information that life goes on as usual. What is common to the exchange, even though it may be partly intended jokingly, is the idea that they have little control over their own lives. What is striking is that Couple B fail to say anything personal at all, even any concern or good wishes for the others. Both couples move like automata past each other, having nothing at all to say to each other apart from the fact that "going on", although they may use tones of ritualised friendship. Here the

personal is depersonalised, reified.

### *Dialog 3*

A small corner-shop in a working-class quarter. A woman aged about 20 and dressed in young fashion (jeans, jacket-top and sports shoes) enters, accompanied by her little boy, the latter sporting Indian war-paint.

Salesgirl: Well, what does he look like!

Mother: Well, he's just come out of play-school.

Salesgirl: And mother can clean him up afterwards, eh?

Mother: Well, yes.

(She seeks out a few small purchases and heads for the cash desk.)

Mother: Have you found anyone for those Snoopy cards I collect?

Salesgirl: Come again? What was that, then?

Mother: Well, it was about my having so many of those Snoopy cards, so I need someone to swap them with. I've already got two albums full and it would be too dear to start a third.

Perhaps someone would be willing to swap, when they've got doubles?

Salesgirl: No, I haven't found anyone yet, I must give it another go.

(She tells another salesgirl about it.)

Mother: So, give me another 3.60's worth! No, better make it four marks!

She purchases new cards for her collection.

Salesgirl: Here's a packet of ten. I'll ask around.

The dialogue falls into two parts, dealing with the Red Indian boy and then with the collectable picture cards. The young woman's relationship to her son seems at first glance human and warm; her relationship to the picture cards however reveals a money problem: ("it would be too dear"). She buys too many of them, wants to swap them but ends up buying even more of them, which she can ill afford. Her actions are determined in the first place by her son and in the second by the cards, so she is at first self-oriented and then, in her purchasing behaviour, oriented towards others. Human and at the same time economically reified. What can she possibly do with these things she doesn't need and hasn't money left for? Swapping, that is, a relapse into the collective society of a pre-industrial world, is what she hopes for.

### *Dialogue 4*

The sixtyish wife of a recently pensioned-off caretaker comes into the managing office of his old job, directly to the pay-desk.

Wife: My husband is now dead, so what happens to his pension?

Even the start of conversations can be reified. The death of her husband is the reason for a pension and the questioner must be wishing that her dead husband be transformed from breadwinner into a pension that she can collect at the pay-desk. Reification as hope!

All dialogues show that human relationships can be turned into relations to things. This is what we refer to as "reification".

## 2. Counter-examples: dialogues that are not reified

The expression "my husband is dead" opens up the possibility for a comparison with a classic dialogue.

### *Dialogue 5*

Conversation between Mephistopheles and Frau Martha in Goethe's Faust, (1808, ll. 2916-

2918):

Mephistopheles: Your man is dead and sends his greetings.

Martha: He's dead? That true heart? Oh pain!

My man is dead! Oh, I swoon!

This is a relationship between people. Mephistopheles' dead man can still send greetings. Martha is deeply afflicted. Admittedly a bit later Martha is disappointed that her husband has left her nothing: "What! No piece to show? No jewellery?" But this is because she has nothing to remember him by. (2933-6). But most of all she would like to find a "witness" to his death (3009), a "death certificate" (2872) and an obituary in the weekly paper (3012). Jewellery and death certificates may be things but they are supportive of human relationships: a ring can stimulate the memory and a death certificate awareness of her new social condition.

A modern dialogue

### *Dialogue 6*

The shop or workshop of a cobbler's and key service in a working-class quarter at 11 a.m.

Me: Good morning!

Him: Morning! It's turned cold. Need a warm jacket!

Me: They stole mine at the University yesterday, together with my keys.

Him: At the university?

Me: Yes, those students...

Him: That's pretty steep! To think even students do things like that nowadays!

He goes off to make the keys and mutters to himself.

Him: Poor Germany, where will it all end up?

Of the three keys only one can be copied. He sends me off to a business rival.

The same place, one hour later.

Me: The key doesn't fit.

Him: That's steep.

He fetches the blank keys.

Him: Well, turns out I took the big one. I wondered why the machine took so much off.

He makes the key and fetches key rings from the store.

Him: Here, you can have these for your trouble. How much did the small key cost at Walter's?

Me: 6.50.

Him: That's 50 cents dearer. And the other one?

Me: Four marks.

Him: One mark more. (The cutting-machine finishes the task).

Here, this one will fit now.

Me: That's good!

The cobbler has problems with things but knows how to get around such things: what he can't do himself he gets a rival firm to do, and what he does wrong he redoes a second time. He is critical of his machine for taking too much off, something he did not expect, and calls it "pretty steep", (the theft and his own mistake). He makes up for his mistake by giving a gift, and points out he is cheaper than the shop down the road. Everything revolves round him, not around other things or people, at least that is what appears in this phase of the conversation. One even gets the impression that he shouldn't be so self-confident. Can he really survive with his small shop, up against the competition from the big stores? Price-cutting and economic pressure is certainly there in his mind, even if only represented by Walter's.

A further example of a non-reified dialogue is a conversation at a granny's birthday party.

### Dialogue 7

It's afternoon at the coffee table, where Granny (Maria) is sitting together with an elderly woman (Grete) and talking.

Grete: Maria, Lisbeth is really run-down with her nerves! And she's got so thin you wouldn't believe it!

Maria: Oh God, with a husband like that it's no wonder.

Another old woman interjects: Why, what's wrong with him?

Maria: He does this (she lifts a glass up to her mouth). Dreadful, isn't it? I would have thrown him out a long time ago.

Grete: It's pretty hard for Lisbeth, so it isn't surprising that she's sick with her nerves.

Maria: And then she still washes and cooks for them all, even for the grandchildren. They exploit her too, and she goes along with it.

Grete: That's right. It's really sad.

Here we see a "real" conversation in which a subject (here, Lisbeth) is treated from various aspects, and so is "explained" and a conclusion is reached in which both speakers agree: "That's right. It's really sad.") There are even alternative courses suggested ("I would have..."). Not just the theme develops, those talking do as well. They come closer. In this dialogue can be seen clear signs of a lively and not at all reified conversation: binding people in communion whilst strengthening the individuality of the speakers, who each make their own contribution to the conversation. The subject is well explored, that is, treated from several aspects, whilst at the same time those talking develop from being non-initiates (or partly informed) into initiates, a conversation that undoubtedly gave pleasure despite the sadness of the theme.

What is really of concern here is that such conversations can only be held in the protection of the private sphere and under the stigma of "gossip", for there is no place for them in the public one where "things" rule.

### 3. Intermediate conclusion

(1) Instances of reification can be found, but also instances of conversations, both historical and present-day, that are less or not at all reified. The existence or absence of reification is then not a permanent characteristic of all dialogue, not even of modern dialogue. (2) If one accepts that reification occurs under particular conditions, then those conditions should be explained *historically*, in so far as neither *situational* nor *functional* circumstances are detectable. (3) Distinctive signs for less or non-reified dialogues are (a) the fact that the interlocutors accept each other socially b) that there is alternating participation in talking, that is, that there should be an openness towards parts of and participation in the changing course of the conversation - (c) the development of the topic thereby produced or its immanent changing and (d) the change that is thereby produced in the interlocutors themselves. (4) Symptoms of reified dialogues are the negation or absence of the above characteristics.

## II. How the dialogue reacts to reification

Everyday dialogues reflect - like other expressions of life - reification and reifying processes. We shall now look at cases in which comparatively unreified dialogues have to deal with those claims and demands that stem from things; particularly the situation *before* reification gets a grip upon the conversation. We must pay particular attention to the social or interactive aspects.

### 1. When the logic of things prevails

Dialogues here explain how a catalogue of customers is to be operated and managed.

### *Dialogue 8*

Frau Wald and Frau Stuhl are working in a mail-order department, the former in IT and the latter on the card index. They are in the office they share.

Frau Wald: What's this then? That can't be right! Did you do that yesterday?

Frau Stuhl: Well, yes, I did. I wanted to tell you. Yesterday I had already realized that there was something wrong about it, but I didn't manage to get it right again.

Frau Wald: You've taken a picture too that's totally wrong, it just doesn't belong there. And the customer number is totally wrong too. Where did you get it from?

Frau Stuhl: Yes, I know. But the number isn't the wrong one. I just forgot to take the one from the index card and transfer it to the picture, that's why it's gone in twice.

Frau Wald: What? How do you work that out? That's just not right. You've got the wrong number in here and that has absolutely nothing to do with the card.

Frau Stuhl: (speaking at the same time) No, no! I know...

Frau Wald: No more of these "no, no's"! Come over here and show me now with this picture. I'd like to check that myself!

(Frau Stuhl moves over to Frau Wald by the computer screen and presses various keys.)

Frau Stuhl: You see! It's perfectly correct on this picture. I just have to put the number in here and then everything works okay.

Frau Wald: That is absolutely wrong! You need to put the customer number in here, the one that is in picture 2. That number is the right one, otherwise the customer won't get any bill at all. Don't you see that?

Frau Stuhl: I see... now I understand. So I have to write this number on the card as well.

Frau Wald: Yes, but under the old number and in red, so one can see straightaway which number is now in the new system.

Frau Stuhl: Then I'm going to have to go through my whole card-index box again. I just have never done that.

Frau Wald. Well, you'd better get down to doing it!

Frau Stuhl has been struggling with her card index and computer. She has done something wrong and now can't get on top of the problem. Frau Wald has found it out: "What's this then?" What follows then is what one refers to in political scandals as a "ruthless exposure of all the facts of the situation" (it's merely that in this particular case it actually happens). What is Frau Wald's tactic?

*She proclaims that the work is totally wrong:* "That can't be right", "...it just doesn't belong there", "totally wrong customer number", "that has nothing to do with the card", "that is absolutely wrong".

*It is all Frau Stuhl's fault:* she has done the thing wrong: "Did you do that yesterday?" "You've taken a picture that's totally wrong". "Where did you get it from" (the totally wrong customer number), "you've got the wrong number in here".

The facts speak against Frau Stuhl: Her denials are of no avail: "the number isn't the wrong one. I have just forgotten..." "You see! It's perfectly correct in this picture." The fact that she plays down the matter doesn't help her either. "I didn't manage to get it right again". "I have merely forgotten...", "no, no. I know..." "I just have to put the number in here and then everything works okay." Frau Wald counters with: "No more of these "no, no's"! Come over here and show me now with this picture. I'd like to check that myself!" And: "You need to put the customer number in here, the one that is in picture 2. This number is the right one... Don't you see that?" Frau Stuhl sees the point.

Frau Stuhl has to do it all over again: She has to write the new number on the card according

to Frau Wald's instructions and go through her "whole card index" again.

Frau Stuhl has failed to see the logic of things. It consists of the number from picture 2 being placed in the relevant picture. Moreover the new number must be written on the card underneath the old number and, of course, in red ink. Things are bound up with the cause-and-effect principle. If Frau Stuhl fails to put something in, as she herself admits, it "comes out double"; but that is doing it wrong. The fact is: "the customer will get no bill at all". The logical consequence would be that, if Frau Stuhl were to go on doing so, the firm would go bankrupt.

The logic of things prevails thanks to Frau Wald; Frau Stuhl has to yield to facts and yield she does. That, in the process of doing so, she gets ordered about and spoken to like a child in the second person singular, is something for which she has no one to blame but herself.

## 2. Resistance strategies against reification: arguing, getting emotional and practising solidarity

In Dialogue 8 Frau Stuhl tried to defend herself. As, however, the facts are against her, she seems slow on the uptake. Frau Stuhl is alone and abandoned by Frau Wald. There are further attempts by people to defend themselves against reification.

### *Dialogue 9*

The Parcel Post Office at c. 8:30 pm; Peters is pushing a cart on wheels around.

A voice on the loudspeaker: Herr Peters is required to report at once to the supervisor's office.

Peters moves off towards the office.

Loudspeaker barks: Herr Peters, go at once to your workplace, please. Herr Peters, to shoots 7-9 immediately!

Peters turns back.

Peters: They're crazy.

Meanwhile a supervisor has turned up.

Supervisor: So that's where you are, Herr Peters. You shouldn't take so many breaks.

Peters: I was on the toilet.

Supervisor: Yes, indeed, we've got our eye on you.

Peters: If you really had, then you would have known that it was the first time I've left my post. What's more, I came back here five minutes ago.

Supervisor: No need to be impertinent!

Peters: I'm quite simply pissed off. It's as if I didn't want to work. I work like everyone else.

The supervisor moves off. Peters goes to his work-colleagues who have observed the scene from five or six yards away.

Peters: That man is particularly screwy.

Reinhard: They've got it in for you. They don't like your appearance for a start.

Peters: That Eckstein's (the supervisor) just an old wanker.

Reinhard: Don't let it get under your skin. Better just shove that cart around. By the way, whose turn is it now for a break?

A disciplinary measure: Peters has been warned. Questions on the text: How do the authorities make themselves visible? Answer. (1) Through the loudspeaker, which orders Peters to and fro, and (2) by means of the supervisor who gives the ticking-off. What is the rebuke, and on what is it based? Answer: "You shouldn't take so many breaks", "we've got our eye on you."

The reproof is related to the time he is duty-bound to work, something regulated by contract as with every employee. Time spent working is paid, exchanged for money. Money can be exchanged for goods, products and services, "things". For that reason working time is directly related to things, indeed it is itself a "thing", as sellable and divisible. The disciplinary measure is designed to ensure the performance of that thing. To be imposed, it requires people (a supervisor) and implements (loudspeaker, surveillance), that is, the supervisory system situated

in a supervision post.

How does Peters defend himself against the reproach? (1) He has an excuse (the lavatory), (2) he was not really closely watched as "...then you would have known that...", (3) it is the first time he had left his post, (4) he has been back already for five minutes (time!). Peters deploys facts against the "facts" of the reproach. He argues logically: he has *personal and objective* reasons. To which the supervisor responds: "no need to be impertinent".

At this point Peters becomes *emotional*. He is "pissed-off" and feels himself unjustly rebuked ("it's as if I didn't want to work... like everyone else"). He has earlier described as "crazy" those who order him to and fro through the loudspeaker (time!), and now he levels the accusation of irrationality against the supervisor ("that man is particularly screwy") and curses him as an "old wanker". Then Peters socializes with his colleagues who display *solidarity* with him, thus strengthening his self-confidence and cheering him up.

This dialogue shows too how reification is imposed, in this instance as a disciplinary measure and against stronger resistance. The three defensive strategies to be observed here are (1) the putting up of facts and argument as "objective" counter-positions, (2) expressions of emotional consternation, (3) showing solidarity with colleagues who are probably dismayed as well. All these strategies are unsuccessful, although they may bring some balm to Peter's dented sense of worth. For the coercive force of the work-regulations, here interpreted and enforced by the supervisors, carries the day despite all resistance.

### 3. Resisting reification by means of detachment

In a work-hierarchy it is difficult to find a means of warding off demands that are presented as being impartial but which those affected find far from such and for that reason kick against them. The means of domination used by businesses can be applied differently from case to case. Here is another situation in which seeming equals meet when busy buying or selling goods.

#### *Dialogue 10*

A corner-shop in a respectable residential quarter. An old-age pensioner is doing her shopping. (January 1990).

Pensioner: And then I'd like three bananas.

Shopkeeper: Bananas have gone up again, too. It's the fault of those people in the DDR<sup>4</sup>.

Pensioner: But they don't set the prices. And I can understand the people over there being glad to be able to eat bananas at long last!

Shopkeeper: You know, you just don't understand the way economics works. You shouldn't trouble your head with all that. But our problems with that lot over there have only just begun.

The shopkeeper behaves in authoritarian fashion, grounding his superiority on some supposed acquaintanceship with the logic of things. In the last sentence it becomes clear that a "genuine" dialogue has not developed. The shopkeeper counters the customer's position by retreating into a distant superciliousness ("you just don't understand..."). One can suppose that the pensioner was not much impressed with the shopkeeper's argument. Breaking off is another tactic that can be used to deal with such "logical, fact-based argumentation". The argument however remains separate from the goods (the bananas are definitely bought) but the two conversation partners go their separate ways: no dialogue gets underway. What at first sight may seem a conversation is not worthy of the name.

### 4. Resistance by going silent and ducking under

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<sup>4</sup>DDR = Deutsche Demokratische Republik (East Germany), joined West Germany October 3, 1990. There was a joke that they just wanted to get access to bananas! \_

Dialogues can be suppressed by "the demands of the situation". At work, for instance:

### *Dialogue 11*

A large printing works with about a hundred workers, at the start of the 23:30 night-shift.

Jonas: Hey, hallo!

Bernd: What, you back again?

Jonas: Yeah, sure! You've seen who's heading the shift?

Bernd: Sure, Zahn is back again. Suddenly the fun's gone. I really can't take the constant prodding. You can't even take a five-minute break, even when there's just nothing to do.

Jonas: Really annoying. I find Heinrich and Fritzsche pretty decent as foremen. At least they don't imagine that we just want to dodge doing the work. They see it at once when there's nothing coming down the production line.

Bernd: I recently heard that Zahn was once demoted to deputy foreman and then promoted again, so probably he wants to keep his job.

Jonas: I heard that, too. But that's no excuse for his beefing and throwing his weight about all the time. The atmosphere at work is somehow nastier when Zahn's around. Everybody's somehow pissed off.

Bernd: The worst thing, I find, is that we can't call it a day early, if the production's done.

Jonas: Yes, I feel that, too. And somehow nothing seems to work when Zahn is around. It's bloody chaos.

Bernd: Watch it, Zahn's coming up behind. I better go off to my place. See you later, maybe.

Jonas: Okay, get going.

The conversation is a lively one, as it casts light on the problem from different sides. The theme is developed. The dialogue is a personal one, as it is held between workmates. But it takes place in an almost subversive atmosphere and is broken off as soon as the foreman approaches them. The dialogue "ducks under".

5: Softening of hardened positions through argument, or:  
how difficult it is to carry on a dialogue that is not reified

Reified speech and forms of speech can easily be put to use as an expression of aggression, as in the restricted question ("Well, is it yes or no?") or in interrogations ("Answer the question!"). Dialogues are not something that can be rigidly laid down but merely offered, as the co-operation of the interlocutor and his good will in really getting involved with the person addressing him or her must first be won, so they go beyond just replying to the question. Non-reified dialogues require a readiness on the part of both speakers to look at aspects other than the purely matter-of-fact. The following dialogue shows how difficult it is to "unreify" a reified position or to humanise the hard-facts line.

### *Dialogue 12*

A car-driver turns into the entry to a parking-place, without checking first for pedestrians and cyclists. A cyclist, who is riding down the cycle path, is forced to brake hard. In an attempt to ride around the car, he then falls. In the course of the ensuing altercation a crowd of passers-by forms around them both, including a pedestrian who had been there from the start and had been hindered by the driver, too.

Cyclist: Did you want to kill me or what?

Driver: Shove off.

Driver: You don't seem to care that you very nearly ran over me!

Driver: Nothing really happened!

Cyclist: What do you mean, "nothing really happened"? I end up lying here and you say nothing

happened? You never even bothered to turn round and see if anything had happened to me. I could have broken something and you would doubtless have simply driven off.

(The driver gets out, comes around the car and looks down at the bike that is still lying on the ground.)

Driver: And are you hurt?

Cyclist: No, I'm not.

Driver: What are you worrying about then?

Cyclist: But that's not the point! The question is, what could have happened to me, and that you weren't the slightest bit concerned.

Driver: OK, it's all right now. And your bike seems not to have been damaged either.

Pedestrian: Good grief, man, you still haven't understood. You just don't do that. You shot round the corner there, without bothering to look. If this man lay dead here now, would that be of no concern to you, either? Come down off your high horse!

Cyclist: Do you realize how many people get run over by cars? And just because people like you don't bother to look.

Driver: Sorry about that. Was in a bit of a hurry. You're right, in fact.

(The driver goes over to the bike and takes a closer look at it.)

Driver: I really hope it's not damaged.

Cyclist: No, I don't think it is.

The theme developed here is whether "anything happened". Contrary opinions exist about that, as the cyclist seems himself as exposed to the danger of being killed, whilst the driver maintains that "nothing at all" has happened. He stubbornly sticks to the facts: the man is unhurt, the bike is undamaged, *ergo* "nothing at all happened". The relationship of cause and effect to which the world of things, the cyclist included, is subordinated, results in the conclusion: no effect, consequently no cause. The traffic accident is seen purely in terms of its physical consequences. The cyclist not only sees the fact that he lay there sprawling on the ground but is concerned with the driver's *intention*. ("Did you want to kill me?", "you don't seem to care", "you would doubtless have simply driven off", which he sums up as "the question is what could have happened to me!") What is important to him is not the actual effect but the potential one, not the facts but the intention. Not the causal result but the people themselves and how they react to the accident is what counts for the cyclist. Owing the fact that the victim keeps hammering away at the driver and a passer-by happens to agree with him (and perhaps the group of bystanders take sides too), the driver is finally compelled to recognize the human aspect of the matter. The reification in the early excerpts of the dialogue gradually softens and the human aspect shines through, so in the end the driver comes to apologize.

## 6. Softening through expressing solidarity

The demands of reified times are ever-present, even in the university, and particularly in connection with professional or pre-professional activities. Arrangements to meet and talk can be endangered by such demands.

### *Dialogue 13*

In a café shortly after 2 pm. A female student is reading the photocopy of a text. A student comes in, gives a rapid glance around and approaches the female student.

Boy: Hello, Ilona. Forgive me, we did say at 1.30, didn't we?

Girl: Yes, we did actually, but it doesn't matter.

Boy: Don't be angry with me. I was given so much to do in the editorial office. I'm doing a work-experience course with the "Advertiser". They just don't let you leave!

Girl: It's okay, really! You can get me a beer for it after the seminar!

Boy: Of course I will.

Both begin to discuss the photocopied text.

Time, too, can be "stretched", thus enabling the conversation to take place. The precondition is that the participants should be flexible and display solidarity, and, more particularly, look for ways of getting around the problem and find space for each other.

## 7. Critique of rationality through demonstrative use of reified language

Reification not merely penetrates the form of the dialogue but even gets its grip on the language used.

### *Dialogue 14*

A young visitor from East Berlin (Oskar) is conversing with someone from Hamburg (Karl) in a pub on a December night in 1989.<sup>5</sup>

Karl: How do you like it here?

Oskar: Real crazy, man (*echt Wahnsinn*). I real (*echt*) like it.

Karl: And what are you doing here? Just looking around, or...

Oskar: Sure. The amount of stuff to buy here is incredible. Real (*echt*) amazing! Over with us you can find cassette players for one thousand marks, and then only in mono, and they're horribly hissy. But here I see you can get a whole stereo deck for a thousand marks. 1000-watt ones!

Karl: What? 1000 watt? I can't imagine that.

Oskar: But it's true! I've seen an advert for one. Made by Schneider. A 1000-watt one, real true (*echt wahr*).

Karl: That's just not possible. Not even the big power amplifiers have so much power, or perhaps they just reach it.

Oskar: But I mean it.

Karl: Who cares?

Oscar is already speaking like a *Wessie*, a West German: he constantly repeats the word *echt* which means something like "real". And he does so when describing products (cassette players, mono and stereo equipment), manufacturers such as Schneider, advertisements he has seen, performance (expressed in watts), relative quality ("mono and they're horribly hissy") and purchase prices in the East and West German marks. All that belongs to the world of manufactured goods.

The form in which Oscar's enthusiasm and its function are <sup>6</sup>expressed can be recognized if we raise the matter of similar expressions employed in different dialogues. We can find the German expression *echt* used in expressions like: *Ich hätte echt nichts dagegen* (I have *real(ly)* nothing against it), *"Ich habe echt keinen Bock auf die dauernde Anmache"* (I *rea(ly)* can't take the constant prodding). *"Das finde ich echt Scheiße"*. (I find it a real bugger.) *"Er ist echt in Schwierigkeiten"* (He's in trouble for *real*) in informal speech.

There are parallels with the German word "Wahnsinn", translated as "crazy" here. For example: *"Am Wochenende war es viel voller. Wahnsinn!"*. (At the weekend it was much more crowded. *Crazy!*) *"Ist schon irre, was alte Leute so alles mitgekriegt haben"*. (It's *crazy* how old people manage to grasp what's going on.) *"Der Cocktail ist irre süß"*. (The cocktail is so sweet it's *crazy*). *"Voll das Chaos hier"*. (Total *chaos* here). Someone "terrorizes" his family, finds it "toll" (*mad*), "verrückt" (*insane*), and flips out. All are expressions of common, everyday

<sup>5</sup> Since the „Fall of the Wall“ November 9, 1989 citizens of East Germany could travel to West Germany. .

<sup>6</sup> These dialogues are not printed here.

speech.

What characteristics do the different variations have in common? We can make experiments with texts about this, replacing concepts with synonyms, weakening expressions, changing the meaning of sentences by putting them in the negative form etc. By means of such experiments we learn (1) that concepts are seemingly unconnected with the sentences in which they are found and can stand independently outside their context. One has the impression of something pasted on or stuck in, for such expressions come from fields quite different from those in which they are employed. If we replace them by "normal expressions" the effect vanishes. (2) *Echt* (genuine or authentic) is synonymous with "effectively" or "really" and, of course, with *effectiveness and reality in a positive sense*. We can replace *echt* in the sentence with *bestimmt* (definitely), *ganz sicher* (absolutely certain), *ich stehe dazu* (I stick by what I've said) without altering the meaning. (3) *Wahnsinn* (crazy) is synonymous with "running wild", that is with extreme emotionality. The idea points also towards spontaneity, disorder, lack of control, and to individuality in the sense of autonomy. In this context "crazy" and its synonyms are a means of presentation full of positive sprightliness.

Our search now is for common ground between the different characteristics. The first aspect is based on characteristics one and three. Emotions are inserted into the sentences by linguistic markers, they do not stem from the sentences themselves. The paraphrases for 'crazy' are released from their original 'real' context and are stereotyped, rendered fixed and stiff: feelings as labels, hence their demonstrative potency.

The second aspect is based on the first and third characteristics. When *echt* too is released from its context, then the relationship to reality becomes uncertain. *Echt* becomes a label for *unecht* or unreal in the sense of "unacceptable". As *echt* is stressed, *unecht* is suppressed but at the same time becomes a topic for discussion.

The third aspect again emerges when considering characteristics one and three. If *Wahnsinn* (crazy) is viewed as a label, then the expression conceals its opposite. But what is its opposite? We can learn that by *reversing* the ideas as an experiment. (Opposites are *italicized*). This produces:

real ( <i>echt</i> )	vs.	<i>unreal (unecht)</i>
insane ( <i>Wahnsinn</i> )	vs.	<i>rationality</i>
mad, freaked out	vs.	<i>dispassionate objective</i>
chaos, terror	vs.	<i>order, planning, control</i>

As opposite meanings of craziness etc, we find rationality, dispassionate objective, order, planning, control, etc. In combination with *echt* and its contrary *unecht*, the lefthand side of the table will be regarded as positive and the righthand one as negative. This gives the solution to the paradox that "*echt Wahnsinn*" should be synonymous with positive spontaneity and sprightliness and at the same time the negation of rationality and control.

Conclusion: The manner of speaking adopted by Oscar and other young men (1) employs expressions as labels and is reified in so far as it insists on genuineness of emotional states, on the spontaneous, uncontrolled, and irrational, on a lack of order, and disavows rationality, dispassionate objectivity, order, planning and control as *unecht*, inauthentic. To that extent this way of speaking is a form of criticism; indeed, here it appears as a provocation. At the same time it recognizes the existence of the rational, objective, exigent world and indeed makes use of its characteristic of entrenchment (*Verfestigung*). So critique is ensnared in acceptance of the criticised.

Pointed illustration: criticism of reification through exaggerating it. Reification and its critique through its demonstrative usage have in common disentangling individual manners of speech

from collective ones, of certain expressions from those generally accepted, hence the fragmentation of speech, the pulverising of traditional relations, the isolation of the speaker. Reification of speech always means regulation, stereotyping and discrimination, it discriminates against others but against the speaker as well.

## 7. Critique of the inexact nature of reified speech

### *Dialogue 15*

A small tobacconist's in a working-class quarter. A punk enters.

Punk: An Ultra.

Sales lady: What's that? Ultra?

Punk: An Ultra!

The sales lady turns round to fetch a packet of "Lord Ultra" from a shelf and hands it to him.

Punk: Do you know of any other Ultras?

Sales lady: No, I don't. Do you?

During shopping in a tobacconist's no real "dialogue" develops, as the punk refuses one. The cigarette brand he requires is called "Lord Ultra", which is a label for an object of a certain complexity. Its reduction to a short formula corresponds to the idea of a brand-name article. But the purchaser shortens the name further to "Ultra" and the shop lady fails to understand. When questioned, the purchaser does what the adverts do, he repeats what he has said. So a meaningless expression is not explained, merely repeated, as if the fact that the saleslady does not understand were her problem. But the seemingly obvious expression is not clear.

## 8. Provisional conclusions

(1) Dialogues have to face the phenomenon of reification and deal with it in different ways. In doing so they are more or less influenced by that reification. (2) They can convey the logic of things in a comparatively unreified form, as can be perceived, for instance, in the conversation between Frau Wald and Frau Stuhl. (3) Dialogues can also "defend" themselves against reification and its agents in different ways: through argumentation, so by keeping matter-of-fact or "logical", by becoming emotional, by exploiting social ties such as the expression of solidarity or collectivisation and finally by various means of taking one's distance from it, stopping talking and remaining silent or by a "ducking under" that is close to subversiveness. (4) A particular form of criticism of reification is the adoption of reified expressions when speaking and using them in an exaggerated manner.

## 9. About the Weberian concept of pursuing rational aims

Max Weber called social behaviour *zweckrational* (purposive/instrumental rational behaviour) when it can be ascertained to be a means towards success by pursuing one's aims rationally after having weighed them carefully. He distinguished it from *wertrational*, that is, value or belief-oriented, *affectional* and *traditional* behaviour (1918-1920, 12). We can test the usefulness of this concept which is occasionally taken to characterize the modern attitude in general, by taking the example of Frau Wald's argumentation. With regard to Frau Stuhl, we can accept that Frau Wald with her instructions is following rational aims of her own, even if this is a rather ideal view of the matter, for it is clear that she is also concerned to keep her colleague down and humiliate her. Her dealing with the computer can however be described so with far less justification. Computer constructors admittedly pursue their own aims rationally, and computer sellers too; Frau Wald merely serves the computer. One may doubt that she penetrates that deeply into the processes, that a really rational decision can be ascribed to her, that she is

practising rational behaviour with the aim of success and not merely following an imitative behaviour model. The Weberian concept of rationality requires at the very least insight and the ability to take everything into consideration, including the "humanity" of the individual and their ability to function. Frau Wald, however, merely makes use of her detailed knowledge and practical experience, that is to say her ability to work the computer. In the latter skill she is superior to Frau Stuhl, who can't work it, but she has no lead over her in purposive rational behaviour (*Zweckrationalität*). It might be sensible to call the contemporary form today of Weber's *Zweckrationalität*, a concept formulated at the end of the Wilhelmine era, *Sachrationalität* (a rational approach to things), in so far as the mere manipulation of things (and people) is concerned and actual aims remain separate; even better *Sachlogik* (the logic of things), as there are cases in which people do not interact rationally with their surroundings, as is the case with Frau Wald and Frau Stuhl, but on the contrary are controlled by the logic of things, whether they see that logic or not.

### III. The destruction of dialogue through things

Once reification has taken over a dialogue, that dialogue is dead. It loses its natural living quality and becomes a mere thing. In this section we shall treat of its pathology.

#### 1. The reification of the speaker

People can tie themselves so closely to objects that they seem to be purely determined by them. They tend to lose their ability to converse and at times are treated similarly by others. Reification stems from identification with things.

#### *Dialogue 16*

Noon, a seatless eatery in the university quarter. A youngish man is standing at a high table, at which two girls join him. They seem to be acquainted and exchange nods.

Him: Hello!

Both: Hi!

(A short silence)

Him: Just got back from America.

(Silence)

Him: Must get back to the Institute again. Open hour!

(Silence)

Him: I'm buying another car today!

One girl: Really? What type of car?

Him: A red one. Not a new one, of course. (He leaves). See you!

A question that can be raised about this text is : how does the speaker present his identity? The answer is by mentioning (1) his trip to America, (2) his connection with the "Institute" in which he has an open or interview hour (3) the car he wants to buy. In addition he mentions his situation of the moment: "Just got back from America", "must get back again", "another car today". What the replies have in common is their connection with time and money. The cost of the trip to America is evidently high. The "open hour" points to his connection with the University and possibly to the fact that he is paid. The car is something he buys, as he himself says. Apart from those objects and facts he has nothing to say about himself, except for the present moment: in the here and now he is defined by a trip (in the past), his "open hour" and the (future) car. He wants to present himself as a man of the world. If one were to look closely at the costs and other references to himself, one would probably find that a Foundation had paid or subsidised the trip and that "open hour" could well refer to some

humbler function in the Institute, whilst the car may be "red" but it is second-hand and so probably a cheap one. Probably he is not such a man of the world as he would like to proclaim.

The two women standing at the counter with him seem to realize that (or even know of it already). Transparent reification, objects as a crutch for identity, is insufficient to entice them into conversation with him. No dialogue emerges from the encounter.

## 2. Dialogue is becoming obsolete in modern trade

Shopping for groceries under present-day conditions demands of the buyer and seller that, even in specialised shops, they adapt their language to the articles without criticising, that is, that they abandon their quality of being "alive". Speech becomes purely related to things and reified, dominated by practical constraints. It becomes a mere shopping tool.

### *Dialogue 17*

In a baker's in which several customers are waiting to be served.

Salesgirl: Who's next?

Lady: I would like two poppy-seed and three rye-bread rolls, and two croissants.

Salesgirl: I'm out of the poppy ones.

Lady: Then give me two sesame ones instead.

Salesgirl: That makes 3.80.

Lady: I'd like a whole butter cake, too, please.

Salesgirl: Should I cut it in two?

Lady: Yes, it doesn't matter.

Salesgirl: Will that be all?

Lady: Yes. Thanks.

Salesgirl: That will be seven marks ten.

The customer pays with a ten mark note.

Salesgirl: And two-ninety back. 'Bye.

There are various kinds of pastries mentioned here. The quantities are given and the price then calculated. The purchase depends on the availability of the goods. If they have run out, alternatives are suggested. The form of an article can be changed, so long as that does not lead to any loss in consumer value for the customer. A query has to be made ascertaining that. Payment is made with money and change is given. The talking involves products, quantities, availability, prices and sums of money. The succession of purchases is organised according to the place of the purchases in the queue, the conclusion of a shopping bout is marked by questioning, and the sequence of actions within an act of purchasing is also something laid down: first naming the product and the quantity, then the price calculation followed by payment.

The crude nakedness of the process of buying and selling is admittedly prettied up in what is said. Buying means saying: "I would like...", "give me please..." Selling means saying: "That makes...", "that will be". The customer thanks, the saleswoman says goodbye. All the same matter-of-factness triumphs, the "human quality" is applied on like make-up. In modern supermarkets talk is kept within ever-closer confines.

### *Dialogue 18:*

On a Saturday morning at 9.30 a.m. a long queue has formed at the sausage counter. A sales-

girl is serving.

Salesgirl: Yes, please?

Customer: A slice of liver paté, please.

Salesgirl: Which one?

The customer points down the long counter; his gesture is vague, not just because of the considerable distance between him and the paté he wants, but also because the long queue behind him obscures his vision of it.

Customer: The dish on the far right.

The salesgirl points at the middle pot with paté.

Customer: No, the next one.

The salesgirl removes the correct pot from the display.

Salesgirl: How much?

Customer: Hmm, 100 grams.

The salesgirl cuts off a corner and lays it on the scales. It comes to rather less than 100 grams.

Salesgirl: Anything else?

Customer: No thanks.

The man at the head of the queue departs, leaving the end of it in constant expansion.

The product that is to be sold has to be named here according to the pattern *name, place and quantity*. The name determines where one must look, the exact position is determined by further questioning, the quantity is estimated, scales weigh it precisely and determine the price according to the previously mentioned relationship of price to quantity. The payment is separate from the provision of the article, delegated to the cash desk.

The need to point at the article is a regression to shopping in a market, but that is merely an illusion as the purchase process is reified by the scales that print out quantity and price and by the separate payment.

In both dialogues the talking is connected to the product. It attempts to pin it down, firstly by name, place and time (where it is located exactly, whether it is still there), secondly by quantity. The price, payment method and possibility to obtain change are all predetermined. The "freedom" of the customer consists in saying what he or she wants and how much of it. The talking is limited to this function.

On second thoughts, the buyer does not even have to pronounce the name of it but has merely to be capable of pointing at the place where the article is at the time. He or she must be capable of giving the quantity. Non-verbal communication would suffice by pointing to a wrapped article with the quantity printed on it, as often is the case with cheese. Everything else happens in any case without the need for speaking or speech is needed only for questions designed to rule out alternatives.

Complete muteness is the rule in self-service shops and automatised sales-points. The dialogue between buyer and producer that has been changed into the limited dialogue between buyer and salesperson now vanishes completely. In the "modern" form of purchasing goods the individuality of the buyer is no longer of significance, right down to the requirement that he speak. The only thing still required of buyers is their ability to select articles and pay for them.

### 3. Dialogue is becoming a monologue about things

When the speaker identifies with things then things characterize the speaker. We have seen how the talking during the purchase of goods, when these are the point of reference, becomes an instrument and superfluous in modernized forms of purchase and so moves towards muteness.

When "spare energy" remains, then the person may speak nonetheless. However, the

dialogue then tends towards monologue even in social situations, as if there were no people there to act as conversational partners.

#### *Dialogue 19*

A small, exclusive optician's in an elegant shopping street. Fairly pricey spectacle frames are lying out on the table. A young couple with a young woman who looks as if she could be the sister of the man are visiting the shop. The young woman is dressed very fashionably, a yuppy type. She is trilling: la-lala-la. The young woman's female friend is asking about her contact lenses. The young woman rushes over to the shelves of spectacle frames and at great speed tries on six to eight of them, one after the other.

Young Woman: I need that one just now. (To brother.) Look... that one's hot stuff. (She keeps trying them on, and, trilling, asks her brother) Say, what do you think would suit me? (Tries another)

A long silence. Finally the brother says: A wooden frame with two slits in it.

Young Woman: This one is fantastic! Really sexy!

She spots a mirror and, losing interest in the frames, begins to make up her eyelids. Her friend is handed her lenses and they all leave the shop, the young woman still trilling away.

The young woman involved speaks about herself and displays her relationship with the frames. She is addressing her brother but no dialogue in the proper sense of the word takes place. She answers her "questions" herself and ignores her brother's reply. Her involvement with things so fascinates her that she loses social contact with the group of which she is part.

Her relationship to the things is characterized by the way she moves with the greatest rapidity from one to the next. Indeed that is why she gives the impression of being over-excited. She just has to try on every spectacle frame and at once lay it to one side. She cannot make up her mind which shape she likes, indeed it is highly questionable that her motive in entering the shop was simply to accompany her friend. The situation has triggered off her apparently playful involvement with the articles. Hardly has she found a mirror before she lets them drop, finding herself an interesting 'thing' that she starts to make up. Her contacts with the frames are as fragmentary as her speech and actions are fragmented. The orderly sequence of thoughts, words and actions dissolves, the whole dissolves into parts which become independent elements combinable into practically any form. The social quality dissolves and with it the "completeness" of the individual.

#### 4. Breaking off a dialogue by way of "reified" time

Less dramatic but more effective still are those interruptions of conversations brought about by a "reification" of time.

#### *Dialogue 20*

On a Friday evening at the entrance to the refectory. Students are waiting. A student recognizes another and they shake hands.

Student 1: Hallo, how's it going?

Student 2: Aha, I haven't seen you around for a long time.

Student 1: Well, I've been having a lot of stress with tests and so on. And you?

Student 2: Oh, it's been okay. Has to be.

Student 1: I must go, got an appointment. You have my number - give me a tinkle.

Student 2: Okay, see you then. 'Bye.

The first one heads rapidly off into the refectory whilst the other continues to wait outside.

#### 5. Pseudo-dialogues with computers

I shall now deal with dialogues that originate from direct contact with technical apparatus.

The development and mass spread of complicated technical products requires from purchasers and users that they be able to adapt to certain practices so as to make the best use of them and avoid damaging them. Technical products must be "operated" (significantly the German word for this, *bedienen*, carries the sense of "served" as by a valet or servant). With domestic apparatus, cameras and photo-equipment, consumer electronics etc. one finds a sheet or pamphlet of operational instructions, with motor vehicles one has to go through a phase of personal instruction followed by a test, and with power stations complex techniques for running them have to be followed. Whilst operation is required here, which demand a far-reaching adaptation to the technical apparatus, dealing with computer and calculators would seem to more a matter of "dialogue".

The impression is given that tasks in the form of questions can be given to a computer, to which it can then "answer", upon which a further question becomes possible, etc. In the process the 'conversation' is carried out in a particular 'language', that in which the programme is written, and this language is compulsory for both computer and user. The process runs roughly as follows: the user "asks" the computer by keying in data and pressing particular function keys, the computer examines the request, processes the data fed in and gives an 'answer' in the form of writing, numbers or a drawing. The computer is therefore to some extent a partner in dialogue. The ability to dialogue is something basic to the idea of "artificial intelligence". When the machine is correctly programmed and provided with data, it can behave like an intelligent partner or contribute to the solving of problems.

### *Dialogue 21*

In front of a computer in the catalogue room of a research library. Behind me a queue of people are awaiting their turn.

Computer: Goodbye!

Please do not forget your reader's ticket.

Please first insert your user identification.

Me: (I insert my user identity card, arrow to arrow, then press key F1).

Computer: Please first insert your user identification!

I feel annoyed, fumble around, a female user from the queue waiting hurries to help.

Her: You have to insert your reader's card!

Me: But I have! (pointing)

Her: Yes, but you've got to push it right in!

Me: Ah, thanks.

Computer: Your account details: Account 88019770

Books lent: 11

Please select function desired!

Me: (pressing the F1 key)

Computer: Goodbye!

Please do not forget your reader's ticket.

Please first insert your user identification! (Reader's card exits computer)

Me: Nothing happened.

I wanted to know what books I had taken out. I begin it all over again, placing the reader's card in again, shoving it right in, arrow to arrow etc.

Computer: Your account details: Account 88019770

Books lent: 11

Please select function desired!

Me: (now pressing the F2 key, followed by the Enter key)

Computer: Account query F2

1 - books due for return within ten days

2 - short list of all books

select then press Enter key!

Me: pressing 2 followed by Enter

Computer: Account summary now printing! (a few seconds go by, then the printout emerges)

Me: pressing F1

Computer: Goodbye!

Please do not forget your reader's ticket.

Please first insert your user identification! (Reader's card exits computer)

PS. The computer nearby demands the entry of your "user number with no spaces" and the "first four letters of your surname" and can be used for an "ordering dialogue" begun and ended by using the "F1 function key".

The so-called "dialogue" with the computer makes it clear to the user that he is uninformed, lacks practice or is in some other way unskilled with the computer (perhaps too nervous or stupid), since it takes leave of him several times. Only help from one of those indisposed by his hesitation, a woman reader waiting behind him in the queue, allows him to escape from the embarrassing situation. She pursues a 'living' dialogue with him that, despite being short and to the point, leads to resolving the problem at hand. So human dialogue helps advance the computer dialogue, mending a disturbance occasioned by the incompetence of the user. The dialogue with the computer is totally reified, in that it is the computer that predetermines all choices. Even time is in the power of the computer, for it has an 'infinite' amount of time running from the moment it is switched on till that when it is turned off, and it is just the user who suffers from the impatience of those waiting behind him, if he fails to conclude the 'dialogue' rapidly enough. Flight is no recourse either, since his reader's ticket is still stuck in the computer and can only be released by the correct operation of the keys. For that reason the 'dialogue' is purely an illusion. There are not two partners speaking to each other (or exchanging information through sign language, but a user who in subjection "serves" (bedient) the apparatus in order to obtain information (which could in this case have been made available to him by other means).

## *Dialogue 22*

A conversation about how a female friend deals with a computer:

Elke: She wanted to learn how to do it (deal with the computer) and so she sat down in front of the computer at my place. (Laughter) I nearly laughed myself silly! Every time she made a mistake she wanted to wreck the computer. I then gave her a teaching programme that explains what to do step by step and praises you up when you get it right. (laughter) That virtually made it worse. When the computer told her that she had made a mistake and should now press such-and-such a key, she bawled at it: "I have pressed this key three times already and if you don't at once do what I want, then I'll..." (laughter again). It was the same with the praise. Then she would say: "What the hell do you think you are to judge me and whether I've done it well or not?" (general laughter).

Carola: It would be the same with me, but I've got to get down to doing it, otherwise I might as well resign. Without the ability to use a computer you can't get anywhere nowadays.

The comic aspect of the telling lies in the fact that a relationship to things is conceived of as a human relationship, but the human relationship is wrecked - tragicomically- on the logic of things. The quintessence of the conversation is the conviction that thing-relations or reification are necessary, that the human relationship to things cannot compete with practical

constraints and that it is ridiculous to think so. In the conflict with the computer it is the human being who is the dummy laughed at.

## 6. The Perversion of Dialogue in Advertising

Dialogue in a completely reified form is transformed into a caricature of itself.

### *Dialogue 23*

The product manager of Nivea sun cream was quoted, with name and photo, as having said the following in the course of a questionnaire about "getting away from it all" (LTU-Magazin II, 1990, 64): "The Guadeloupe experience - a dialogue with the sun! It vitalises my body and enlivens the mind. It's a total holiday for me."

The product manager's experience ("experience", "vitalises", "enlivens") consists of the sun shining upon him in Guadeloupe, that is, a purely one-sided relation, in that he, apart from the fact that he chooses to go to Guadeloupe, which the sun definitely did not influence, can in no way influence its shining, so the so-called dialogue is solely determined by the heavenly body. Amusingly enough, his experience would appear to be determined by yet another "thing", namely Nivea Cream, the product managed by him, which is supposed to ensure that the sun's effects on him should not be damaging. His dependence on two things, the sun and the cream, is as "total" as the holiday, in that he places himself in the hands of the sun (and the cream). Moreover it was probably the management of the latter that made the total holiday possible in the first place.

Under those conditions of a double dominance of things, his claim that there is a "dialogue" is an advertising gimmick, the commercializing of a reified relationship through an advertising medium. It is as cliché-ridden as his use of the idea of "vitalising", the talk of "body and soul" and of a "total holiday". To put it more precisely, it is a confidence trick.

## 7. The Reification of Social Relationships

Non-reified or hardly reified dialogues are connected with human beings and their relationship to each other. Under the dictatorship of things this connection is broken. Talk is no longer oriented towards people but towards things. In Dialog 17 human beings still are in evidence, even if somewhat foreshortened: "I would like...", "give me...", "may I...", "should I...", "I will need". The customer thanks, the sales lady greets. But all the same: matter-of-factness triumphs and the "humanity" is false. In Dialogue 18 the human beings have vanished: salesgirl and purchaser are turned towards the liver paté, not towards each other. In both dialogues the social relationships of the speakers remain at the end of the dialogue what they were at the beginning, the interlocutors are neither drawn closer to each other through their talking nor do they draw further apart. The personal relationship of each to the other is the same, that is, no relationship at all. Both act only in their qualities as buyer and seller, not in any other kind of relation. Here what really is operating is the buying of products in exchange for money, not their relation to each other. The dominance of things leaves no room for any development of a relationship between the two parties. As the latter nevertheless once existed (although with other people), in particular when producing products, and since even today it is still possible, one can say: objects or things have suppressed the relationship with people and obstruct it. All that remains is a partial activity: buying and selling.

## 8. The loss of the exploratory capacity of dialogue

When the social conditions for dialogue are destroyed in situations of reification, then it loses its

explorative and heuristic capacity. The conversation partners in dialogues 17 and 18 learn nothing about each other, apart from the fact that the saleswoman listens to what the customer wants and the customer to what the saleswoman has in stock. The actors and their relations with each other are dominated by practical constraints and relate to wares, not to each other. And although they learn nothing of each other, they learn nothing about the wares either. The quality, freshness, taste and ingredients of the products are taken for granted or treated as of no interest, the adding up of the bill and what the saleslady thinks about it all remains secret, not public. Of course everything that touches upon the personal life of the customer or seller remains excluded from the questioning (except in small corner shops). Whoever has attempted to ask questions about the products or the seller herself when standing in a queue will know what I mean. Such conversations get nowhere and are cut dead. In contrast, the logic of purchasing things is affirmed, with its sequence of naming the article and amount, calculating the price then paying, with the article becoming the property of the buyer, everything following the if-then pattern or cause-and-effect relationship.

## 9. The trivialisation of dialogue and loss of its legitimacy

When dialogue as an art form fades out as a means of apprehending reality, when public discourse is reduced to one-way communication and public discussion to a mere bundle of disparate theses, when political discussion and interviews with politicians become no more than stating one's own standpoint, when the language of buying is narrowed down from bargaining to mere product advertising transmitted through the mass-media, and when the latter themselves are reified, becoming subject to purchase or sale even in small parts, to sum up, when public life itself is reified, then dialogue as such is confined to the private sphere and ordinary life. Thereby it loses the pretension to be a means of apprehending reality and thus its legitimacy, as the discoveries and inventions that really affect and threaten mankind are no longer made in ordinary life, since big technology, capitalist management, top executives in banks and leading associations do not use ordinary methods when apprehending reality and passing to action. The consequence of all this is the trivialisation of dialogue.

Let us not deceive ourselves. The public discourse demanding "readiness to dialogue" and talk is generally related to others than those making the recommendation and is addressed to the power-elites, a sign that the readiness to dialogue is not assumed there but is nonetheless held to be feasible. Dialogue is no longer viewed as a means of apprehending real or scientific knowledge, except for a few epistemological exceptions.

The trivialisation of dialogue confines it to everyday themes and trivial forms. For example, it deals with information about the speaker himself or about other people, with contact building, quarrels, asking the way, gossip, commentaries on the content of the mass media etc. Not only does the world of things destroy it but it is also losing its legitimacy as a means of spreading awareness of the real world.

## 10. Reflections

People are the custodians of reification and its victims. They identify with things, both trying to force through their logic and putting up resistance against them. With the possibilities available they put forward criticisms of reification. That means that reification is part and parcel of daily speech and action. Practical constraints impose their effect on the content and themes of dialogue, and even on its forms. This can go so far as to cut down dialogue into monologue and even reach the point where speech become totally superfluous. The idea that dialogue itself could come to an end is becoming envisionable.

Two developments seem particularly to have had an effect on dialogues, the modernisation

of production, recognisable by the social conditions in which automation takes place and the relation of people to the highly complex technical equipment on the one hand, and by the modernisation of consumption in the broadest sense, by which we mean the automation of shopping through "self-service" marketing. Similar relations have been established in the consumption of mass media. Dialogues here are no longer required. For this reason the approach shifts towards a reflection on relationships inclusive of the conditions of production and consumption and so their present state of development. To examine these further would however lie beyond the scope of our enquiry.

One more aspect should be taken into account. When dialogues are reified and language destroyed, refuges remain to which living dialogue can withdraw, however badly it may be damaged. These 'ecological niches' of living speech exist and are even expanding, for the world of things has not totally destroyed highly variegated and densely branched worlds of life. Research on language and speech can sniff out a living quality in ordinary life, in the world of production, even in that of consumerism. It is important not just to recognize the processes by which speech is destroyed but also those by which it is maintained.

#### IV. The reconstruction of dialogue

Dialogues find themselves, as the study of them shows, in a parlous state. They are pushed aside and spurned, trivialised and are of doubtful repute in so far as their suitability for apprehending scientific reality is concerned. Whenever they come into contact with things they are repulsed or destroyed. Interdisciplinary themes stress not the naturalness and good health of dialogue but its pathological nature.

And yet they still exist, arise continually anew and join battle with reification. Dialogues do have positive aspects. Those aspects are not seen simultaneously in all everyday dialogues for the latter fragment in conditions of reification, but they can nonetheless put in an appearance, if one examines their various kinds and forms of expression in relation to each other. I shall sum up the main points. The virtues of dialogue are:

(1) Its ability to pass forward from the parts to the whole or from the particular to the general, so that the whole is formed of the parts but the parts in turn receive a new significance from the whole. In this way fragmentation is overcome. On the social level, for instance, those speaking as individuals may discuss a topic and through their discussion common ground arises, a communitarianism, something complete and general that at the same time affirms the parts, the individuality of the individuals. (2) The ability to realize that the singularity of the parts and the rigidity of their relationships is something that can move and so be changed, thus overcoming stasis. For example, the theme in a discussion can be developed to the point where a change in the speakers is brought about and so in the group pursuing the discussion. (3) The ability to grasp the possibilities that lie behind the facts, that the given is but one solution amongst several. (4) By raising questions one can get to the bottom of things, so the potential to weigh existing ideas critically is one of the virtues of dialogue. From all these aspects stems (5) the capacity of dialogue for discovery, for exposing the structures "behind" appearances, for transcending them.

These characteristics of dialogue can put into question the reification of the world, its instrumentalisation, its hard-and-fast nature, and the cause-and-effect relationships, the practical constraints that appear to rule it. They set dialogue potentially on the side of living people, of life, change, movement and development.

How can the possibilities that exist in dialogue, even if often slight, be realized and used? There are several choices.

(1) The attempt can be made to revive dialogues that stem from a time previous to reification. A particular reformist direction in educational theory has suggested the following as Socratic method: the putting in question of the seemingly obvious by critical examination

(Nelson 1970).

The problem with that is that pre-reified dialogues are extremely difficult to transfer to a reified world in which they smell strangely like something from a museum as other classical texts do too, since they do not react against reification but only with themselves and develop free from external pressures. Reification cannot simply be thought away, as it is a characteristic mark of the modern world and of the even more fragmented postmodern one, and you would have to think society and the speaker existing in that society away too. Classified pre-reified dialogues should be studied and analysed but they are not suitable for transplantation into our times.

(2) Dialogues pursued nowadays as everyday conversation are crippled by reification and, in one-to-one communication are too feeble to stand up to the burden of it, let alone smash their way out. This applies also to the attempt to reach, in discussion groups or through public debate and argument, scientifically-based conclusions. Such discussions are dominated by projection of self-image, monologuing and struggles for dominance, not by real dialogue. Group discussions are affected by this too, as Thomas Leithäuser has shown.

(3) Discourse, that is rationally pursued dialogue, should lead to the attainment of knowledge (or “truth”), if it is, in Jürgen Habermas's words, to be measured by the yardstick “of the ideal of attaining unanimity by means of unrestrained communication free from relations of dominance”, which requires as its precondition “living together in communication without coercion” (1973, 297). Most remarkable is the idea of letting truth emerge from dialogue, and so aiming at consensus by means of discourse. That is the function of the classical (Platonic) dialogue. Habermas sees, rightly I feel, that the transposing of the latter into the society of our day is not possible without change. He lays down conditions for it, namely “unrestrained” and “non-coercive communication” without “relations of dominance”, which would imply a transformation of our present society, were one to try to implement it. Indeed the idea is described as an “idealized” one. With such a conception social conditions would have to be changed so as to enable the dialogue to have its effect.

(4) To my mind, the solution of the problem should lie in introducing the dialogue here and now as a process designed to produce awareness, despite the reified situation, taking into account its effects and treating reification itself as a thing. The use of dialogue should be rendered systematic, so it can prevail against the “system” of things. So one will have to say farewell to the naturally grown form of dialogue (the classical dialogue, or uncorrupted everyday conversation). One should abandon the idea that changing society by means of concrete talk is possible. But one must preserve the principle by which dialogue obtained its achievements in the field of philosophy and epistemology, even though the traditional form will have to be dropped. It is what I term the “dialogue principle”. It combines the virtues of the dialogue and employs it in a particular way to analyse the reified world, to put in question the real world and criticize it. One could call this procedure, the abstract form of dialogue, dialectical, too.

As it is not a particular form of concrete dialogue nor a special way of dealing with it by any particular speaker that is striven for, but a principle, an awareness-engendering methodology, which is a procedure, it is possible for dialogue to escape from the onslaught of things and then question the reality behind things. The passivity stemming from its destruction is then transformed into enlightened activity.

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