HANNELE DUFVA

BELIEFS IN DIALOGUE: A BAKHTINIAN VIEW

1. INITIAL POSITIONING: COGNITIVE BUT NOT COGNITIVIST

For some time now, students’ and teachers’ beliefs about Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have been recognized as a relevant source of data in applied language studies. The main approaches to exploring beliefs can be loosely divided into the mainstream approach (as obvious in, e.g., Wenden, 1986 or Horwitz, 1987, 1988) and its alternatives (for a discussion see, e.g., Kalaja, 1995; or Barcelos, Chapter 1, this volume).

My own approach to learners’ and teachers’ beliefs is cognitive. That is, I discuss beliefs as cognitive phenomena. In many recent approaches of an alternative persuasion – e.g., discursive or social constructivist in nature – cognitive approaches to beliefs have been heavily criticised. What has to be noted, however, is that the criticism is levelled at those cognitive approaches that share the views of mainstream cognitive psychology which is Cartesian in nature and which also has been called cognitivist (for a collection of critical approaches to cognitivism, see Still & Costall, 1991). The basic metaphors of mind, memory and knowledge embedded in the cognitivist line of argument see mind as a container in which knowledge – whether linguistic or non-linguistic in nature – is memorized and stored in the form of static representations.

The cognitivist discourse – both in psychology and in SLA research – speaks in language that strongly emphasizes this static or unchanging nature of mental knowledge. In addition, SLA research has borrowed heavily from the Chomskyan notion of language. Although this debt has not always been explicitly stated, it is shown by many features, such as the term ‘acquisition’ itself – a Chomskyan loan. It is evident that not only language knowledge (i.e., grammar and lexicon) but also the various types of metalinguistic and metacognitive knowledge (e.g., beliefs about SLA) are seen in terms of static internalized knowledge that the individual possesses. The stable, static or unchangeable nature of beliefs is among the most central claims of the mainstream approach (e.g., Wenden, 1987).

The mainstream cognitivist argument, rationalist and Cartesian as it is, also stresses the individuality of mental knowledge: the fact that knowledge – either cognitive or metacognitive in nature – is an individual possession and consists of representations or schemata stored in the mind. This conceptualization of the mind
sees contextual influences as secondary and assumes that the properties of the mind are not crucially dependent on the outside influences and forces once they have been acquired and established.

One further point which characterizes the mainstream analysis of learners’ beliefs is their research methodology. The central studies on language learners’ beliefs lean heavily on the experimental methodology of the social and behavioural sciences and its standard procedures of data collection and analysis, such as the use of surveys and questionnaires in collecting data, and the quantitative means in its analysis. In this respect, the approach connects with the positivist philosophy of science which aims at explanation and generalization (for a discussion of the limitations of the experimental paradigm in psychology see van Langenhove, 1995). To summarize, according to the mainstream cognitivist approach, a belief is an individual mental knowledge structure which is fairly fixed in nature and which can be studied by using the traditional tools of experimental and quantitative research.

As stated above, I too adapt a cognitive point of departure in the analysis of beliefs. It has to be noted that my view – which is based on dialogism – differs from the mainstream cognitivist view in almost all major respects. First, the overall view of cognition leans on a non-Cartesian philosophy of mind (as discussed within several different traditions only some of which I will mention below).

Second, the linguistic inspiration comes primarily from the dialogical philosophy of language, which was first formulated in Russia by the authors of the Bakhtin Circle, such as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1993) and Valentin N. Voloshinov (1973). Recent work on dialogism includes in particular the important work by Rommetveit (1992) and the contributions to the theory of language by Linell (1998), Lähteenmäki (1998a; 1998b) and Dufva (1998). The contribution of dialogical thinking to language learning and teaching has been discussed by, e.g., Dysthe (1996) and Morgan and Cain (2000). Also, many assumptions about the nature of language and cognition that are discussed here are not typical to dialogical theory alone, but are shared by such areas of study as socio-cultural and neo-Vygotskian approaches or activity theory (For discussions, see, e.g., Rogoff & Lave, eds. 1984, Engeström 1995, Alanen, this volume).

Third, in both the philosophy of science on which I rest my discussion and the research methodology I have used the emphases are different from those that mark the cognitivist view. One important influence is the hermeneutical tradition in general and phenomenological thinking in particular. The contribution of dialogism to these will also be discussed. Thus the starting point here is to analyse beliefs as subjective experiences using the data consisting of individuals’ narratives, in one form or another. As the approach is – to a degree – data-oriented, I will start with a discussion of the data.

2. EXPERIENCE AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY: COLLECTING DATA

The data I discuss below and from which I give some examples comes from various projects in which Finnish language learners’ views have been studied and analysed. In one study, we analysed Finnish adults’ views on language learning and language