Chapter 7
The Mind as a Semiotic Interface

Summary: Volosinov presents a radical theory of the mind: The mind is a semiotic phenomenon that rests on social grounds. This theory and its relevance to the meaning of the sign is examined in the current chapter.

Volosinov’s socio-semiotic theory is presented in his book “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,” written in 1929 but first translated into English in the early 1970s. Unfortunately, this book, one of the greatest intellectual and cross-disciplinary achievements of the twentieth century, went largely unheeded by its relevant scientific audience from the humanities and the social sciences in general and the systems science community in particular. This disregard may be attributed to psychological avoidance by certain intellectual circles of any scholarly work that refers to Marxism and, on the other hand, of Marxist intellectual circles that found no reference to Marx in this book. Indeed, “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language” does not refer to Marx’s work, and it is, as Volosinov himself suggested, a pioneering venture, with no substantial roots in Marxist theory. Another possible explanation for the disregard of Volosinov’s work may be its anti-reductionist spirit, which sharply criticizes most of the scientific paradigms that still govern our academic life. In this sense, Volosinov’s work is of enormous value to the systems science community that adopted an anti-reductionist approach as one of its mainstays.

We know almost nothing about Volosinov the man, and the scientific literature that refers to his work mostly discusses the question whether Volosinov’s work can be attributed to the well-known Russian scholar Bakhtin. In contrast to the disregard surrounding Volosinov the man and the problem of authorship, the intellectual context in which he operated and to which he responded is well known.

During the 1920s, the semiotic theory of Saussure, previously presented, was a major source of interest for Russian intellectuals and the separation between “La Langue” and “La Parole” was a major controversy among those intellectuals circles. Volosinov aimed to bridge the specific gap between the two apparently different systems, but more important to create a system of thought that transcends other dualistic relations as well. As suggested by Matejka:

In his attempt to operate as a dialectician, he sees individualistic subjectivism and abstract objectivism as thesis and antithesis and proposed as dialectical synthesis beyond this opposing trends, a synthesis that would

Matejka’s interpretation of Volosinov’s work locates it in a Hegelian-Marxist tradition. My own reading of Volosinov is quite different and locates his thesis closer to radical scientific notions of complexity (Neuman, in press). Complexity is an issue I aim to discuss later, but the general idea of complexity as a non-linear, multilevel, dynamic approach to the study of multi-agent systems is the one that should guide the reader during this chapter.

The most important theoretical contribution of Volosinov is his attempt to lay the foundations for a socio-semiotic theory of the human mind. The mind, or “psychic experience” as he calls it, is considered as “the semiotic expression of the contact between the organism and the outside environment” (p. 26). In modern terms, we may rephrase this statement by saying that psychic experience can be considered as the interface between the organism and its environment. This suggestion is important since it portrays the mind as a boundary phenomenon and not as a fixed entity that can be reduced either “downward” to a material brain or “upward” to vague metaphysical concepts, such as the Cartesian self. This idea is important since, if we are part of reality, then our sign system (mind) demarcates the boundary between ourselves and a wider system of which we are a part. In this sense, mind as a semiotic interface must have a recursive-hierarchical structure that corresponds to the fact that it signifies a system of which it is a part and upon which it reflects.

The idea of a semiotic system as a boundary phenomenon is also important for several other reasons, such as that it presents a radical alternative to the two main narratives of the West: empiricism and rationalism. By portraying the mind as a boundary phenomenon, as the interface between the organism and its environment, one cannot understand the mind by turning outside to the environment, neither by turning inside, but as a unique and differentiated system with its own “language”:

Outside the material of signs there is no psyche; there are physiological processes, processes in the nervous system but no subjective psyche as a special existential quality fundamentally distinct from both the physiological processes occurring within the organism and the reality encompassing the organism from the outside, to which the organism reacts and which one way or another it reflects. (p. 26)

This excerpt should be carefully read repeatedly because Volosinov is making an important statement. He is not denying the possibility that cognitive processes can take place apart from semiotic activity but that “no subjective psyche as a special existential quality” exists outside the realm of signs. This statement is in line with the position presented by Luria: Thinking can take place without semiotic mediation,