

Comprehension: A dialogic authorial approach

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Abstract

The problem of defining and analyzing the concept of comprehension as a social phenomenon is arguably one of the key issues in psychology and education. At its core, the problem entails asking what sort of social relationship is at the basis of comprehension. Traditionally, agreement among participants is viewed as the basis of social comprehension. I analyze and criticize two major traditional agreement-based approaches to comprehension: fundamentalist and constructivist. My critique of traditional approaches focuses on their arguably wrong assumption about the principal transparency of human consciousnesses. Based on the work of Bakhtin, I develop a dialogic authorial approach to comprehension predicated on the dialogic nature of social relationships—and on the principal opaqueness of human consciousnesses. I use an educational case from my own teaching in which I abstract and analyze the key features of my concept of a dialogic authorial approach to comprehension.

Keywords

Comprehension, dialogic pedagogy, Bakhtin, transparency of consciousness

Introduction

The problem of defining and the analysis of comprehension as a social phenomenon is arguably one of the key issues in psychology and education. The evolutionary psychologists Tomasello, Kruger, and Ratner (1993) argue that the unique ability of humans to organize themselves through culture has emerged from the discovery of a new evolutionary biological capability of intersubjectivity—the ability to pay attention to what another person is doing and to understand his or her intention. In Tomasello's view, intersubjectivity creates not only the possibility of culture but also true teachability and true comprehension. In order to

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recognize the truth of this perspective, I use the term *social* comprehension rather than simply comprehension to emphasize that all comprehension is rooted in its social basis. Even when comprehension is defined non-socially but cognitively as, for example, “having or exhibiting wide mental grasp” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprehensive>), the issue of whether or not one exhibits “wide mental grasp” *in practice* (or through research operationalization) becomes a social challenge as relevant others have to address this issue.

Traditionally, agreement among participants about a particular statement—agreement about what the statement means, or agreement about what inferences can be legitimately drawn from the statement itself, or agreement about focus of attention in or about the statement, or agreement about understanding itself—is viewed as the basis of social comprehension. Agreement is viewed not only as a proxy for the correct comprehension but it also defines, operationalizes, and provides the criterion for comprehension within this traditional approach to comprehension. Thus, in Tomasello’s definition of intersubjectivity, the agreement about the focus of attention and about actors’ intentions defines the intersubjectivity. However, traditional, agreement-based, approaches to social comprehension differ about the content and participants’ level of agreement defining social comprehension.

In this paper, I will analyze and criticize two major traditional agreement-based approaches to comprehension. I call the first major approach *fundamentalist* because it focuses on the stable meaning that people carry from one to another via their oral, action, and text messages. Here, comprehension is defined as an agreement between the author about his/her message and the recipient of the message *about the content of the message*.

I call the second major approach *constructivist*¹ because it focuses on the participants’ inferences drawn from and the presumed transcendence of the meaning through communication and observation. Here, comprehension is defined as an agreement among the participants about the legitimacy of the participants’ inferences drawn from the original messages and transcendence of the original messages.

My critique of traditional agreement-based approaches to comprehension will focus on the questionable presumption of the principal *transparency* of human consciousnesses rooted in these approaches. This presumption makes people interchangeable and comprehension non-authorial, non-unique, non-personal, as ultimately it does not matter, in this view, who initiates social comprehension (beyond the issue of the copyright, where the origination of the valuable meaning is important and defines its proprietary ownership).

Based on the work of literary theoretician and philosopher of dialogism, Mikhail Bakhtin, I will develop an alternative, dialogic authorial, approach to social comprehension based on a *dialogic social relationship*. This dialogic authorial approach is based on the assumption of 1) the principal *opaqueness* of human consciousnesses that 2) promotes the *permanent* mutual interest of people in each other (i.e. interaddressivity) (Matusov, 2011b). I use an educational case—my

dialogic pedagogy for teaching preservice teachers in how to provide sensitive guidance to students who are culturally different than they are—to abstract, analyze, and discuss the key features of a dialogic authorial approach to comprehension.

*Two major traditional agreement-based approaches to comprehension:
Fundamentalist and constructivist*

Traditionally, social comprehension has been defined as an agreement. It is an agreement—mutual, when all parties recognize the agreement, or unilateral, when only some parties recognize the agreement,—between a listener/reader/observer and the authority for the original utterance/text/action/deed to be comprehended. The authority for the original utterance/text/action/deed to be comprehended is usually the author of the original utterance/text/action/deed, but not necessarily. This authority can be horizontal, egalitarian, dynamic, and fluid—i.e. all involved parties are viewed as the authority of understanding—or vertical, hierarchical, stable, and rigid. In school, for example, agreement, on which understanding is based, is usually unilateral, while the authority of understanding is vertical, hierarchical, stable, and rigid. Such an authority can be the teacher or the designers and evaluators of a test. Teacher, “When did the World War II start?” Student, “On September 1st, 1939.” Teacher, “That’s correct.” The traditional agreement-based stable approach to comprehension is based on a triadic communicative exchange so common for conventional schools. The first part of the triadic exchange is Initiation by the authority (e.g. the teacher) with the original utterance/text/action/deed to be comprehended. The second part is Response by a student. And the third is Evaluation by the authority (Lemke, 1990; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). The more the authority agrees with the listener/reader/observer’s reply to the original utterance/text/action/deed to be comprehended, the higher evaluation will be (e.g. the more the student “gets it”). At the end of the day, the correct comprehension is established when relevant people who agree with it (Latour, 1987).

Of course, in the traditional agreement-based approach to comprehension, the agreement between the listener and the speaker (for example), establishing the listener’s comprehension, is not necessarily the listener’s agreement *with* the author’s message itself but rather *about* what has been said. For example, during the ear of the Soviet Union, many Estonian students disagreed with the Soviet history textbook’s account that Estonia voluntarily joined the Soviet Union in 1940. However, their disagreement did not preclude them from doing well in school history courses and from passing on the high school exit exams (Wertsch, 2002). According to this agreement-based approach, people can understand each other, while disagreeing about the message that they understood. What they agree on is what the message says but not necessarily, whether they agree with the message itself or not. Such an agreement about what the message is about is the proxy, operationalization, criterion, and collective symbol of their mutual comprehension.

In some cases, this agreement can be false: people think that they agree about what has been said while actually they don't as they or a third party may determine it later on. In other words, there can be a conceptual gap between the agreement, pronounced by the parties at the moment, and "the actual comprehension" as it can be established later on by a stronger authority (e.g. social scientists). However, in practice, the gap, arguably, does not exist because at the end of the day, comprehension—its presence—absence, degrees, and depth—is measured by the agreement. "The actual comprehension" is still defined by an agreement.

In my observation of the diverse multidisciplinary literature on comprehension, I recognize at least two major types of the traditional agreement-based approaches to comprehension (and their hybrids). I call the first type of agreement-based approach to comprehension "fundamentalist". According to the fundamentalist agreement-based approach to comprehension, the message of the utterance/text/action/deed is firmly rooted, determined, and constrained by the perceived stable structure of the utterance/text/action/deed itself and nothing else. This fundamentalist approach is based on the conduit metaphor that words, texts, actions, and deeds carry out the stable meaning that be transferred from one person to another intact when the message is structured well (Reddy, 1979). The work of the author is to make this structure of the utterance/text/action/deed as unambiguous and clear as possible. The work of the reader is to extract carefully and exactly the message, intended by the author, with the help of the structure, without any distortion and adding anything "subjective" to the author's stable message. For novice readers this process can be facilitated by the teacher, scaffolding the process. Well-disciplined authors and readers should not have a problem with comprehension. Through the triadic exchange of comprehension, the degree of transmission of the immutable message from the speaker to the listener is evaluated. Aukerman characterizes the pedagogy, based on the fundamentalist approach to comprehension, as "comprehension-as-outcome pedagogy" (2013, p. A3), "teachers provide students with information aimed at enabling the production of certain understandings. Students are taught vocabulary and content knowledge, for example, on this premise: if students have a robust vocabulary and appropriate background knowledge, they will be able to interpret texts correctly (e.g. Baumann, 2009)."

I call the second type of agreement-based approach to comprehension "constructivist." According to the constructivist agreement-based approach to comprehension, the message of the utterance/text/action/deed is constantly constructed by the author, by the listener, and by their interaction with the structure of the utterance/text/action/deed in the context. An author's message is viewed as comprehended by the listener when the listener makes an inference from the author's original utterance, which may be a very new thought for the author (or the external observer), but the author agrees with this inference as legitimate. In this case, the message is constantly changing in the triadic exchange of comprehension. Comprehension is an effortful and creative process (Reddy, 1979). A constructivist agreement-based comprehension would look like the following. Teacher: "When did the World War II start?" Student: "It depends on whom to

ask as different participants would see it differently.” Teacher: “Yeah, good point! I guess I was asking about the conventional view, which is from a point of view of the victors” (see, Beevor, 2012, for elaboration of this historical position). A listener’s Response to an author’s Initiation may transcend the author’s Initiation, while the author’s Evaluation of the listener’s Response may transcend the listener’s Response. However, the sense of agreement between the author and the listener about the message transcendence regulates the process of comprehension in their mutual agreement about the legitimacy of the transcendence. In the contrast to the fundamentalist agreement-based approach, the constructivist agreement-based approach does not see the meaning as immutable and firmly rooted in and controlled by the structure of the utterance/text/action/deed itself. Rather it sees the meaning as being actively constructed by the author, listener, the structure of the text, and the context.

The constructivist agreement-based approach to comprehension promotes its own pedagogy, focusing on teaching *comprehension strategies* and procedures such as making predictions, questioning the text, summarizing the text, making references to the text, inferring, grounding observations in the text, clarifying text through reading, activating the reader’s own prior knowledge, and so on. Aukerman calls this pedagogy “comprehension-as-procedure pedagogy” (2013, p. A4). She refers to Harris and Pressley (1991) who nicely justify this type of pedagogy, “Strategy instruction provides students with their culture’s best secrets about how to obtain academic success, strategies many students either would not discover at all or would discover only after a great deal of frustration and failure” (p. 395). As Aukerman describes how applying legitimate comprehension strategies in the legitimate ways (from the teacher’s point of view, of course) may lead different student readers to different but still legitimate conclusions about the same text, which is OK in the constructivist agreement-based approach to comprehension. What is important, though, is that the authority (e.g. the teacher) agrees with the student’s particular use of a particular comprehension strategy, within a particular discourse and practice (e.g. of the academic subject in school), to infer and transcend the meaning of the original text, “. . . when a reader generates a meaning that does not conform to the right set of disciplinary practices, that reading is considered unacceptable” (Aukerman, 2013, p. A5).

Besides pure agreement-based approaches, there are their hybrids. A hybrid of these agreement-based approaches to comprehension was offered by Yury Lotman, a Soviet semiotician. He argues that text has “two basic functions: to convey meanings adequately, and to generate new meanings” (Lotman, 1988, p. 34). In this hybrid approach, both fundamentalist and constructivist agreement-based approaches are combined as independent and complimentary: the conveyance of meanings can exist independently of generating new meanings. One may argue after Lotman (cf. Wertsch, 1991) that, deeply down, every constructivist agreement-based approach is *also* fundamentalist because it is always essentially hybrid—to make a good, legitimate, interpretation, one has to “understand”, i.e. “get” correctly, the message of the author. However, in my view, it does not need

to be so. For example, Bakhtin assumed a *radical non-agreement-based constructivist approach*, which is not necessarily based on agreement, that meaning is always unique and fluid and it cannot be transferred or repeated without becoming something new and different (Bakhtin, 1986, 1999). A repeated message even gets a new meaning from being “repeated” and “revoiced” among other possible meanings (e.g. consider a court battle for original patents and copyright). Bakhtin argued that in the meanings of two messages, anything that looks “the same” is not actually the same on close investigation. Even more, the meaning never remains equivalent to itself in the first place.

A radical constructivist *agreement-based* approach is also possible and does exist (see, for example, Latour, 1987; Milner, 2008; Reddy, 1979; Wittgenstein, 2001). According to radical (or pure) constructivist approaches, Lotman’s first basic function of a text “to convey meanings adequately” is an illusion. Rather, a peculiar sociocultural, historically evolved practice exists in certain particular societies—the practice of ignoring, abstracting, and masking the inherent and unavoidable transformation of the meaning (Latour, 1987). This activity of ignoring, abstracting, and masking is very creative on its own terms. Speakers must, for example, account for when and how two utterances/texts/actions/deeds have “exactly the same” meaning in the particular context and in what contexts they are viewed as different. The question emerges is why this peculiar sociocultural practice has been historically developed in the first place in some modern societies.² Latour argues that this practice of reifying agreement has historically emerged in networks of modern practices of science-making, bureaucracies, economy, governing, and so on, based on consumers’ desire for the mutual replaceability of people³ (Latour, 1987, 1993, 1996).

Critique of the traditional agreement-based approaches to comprehension: The principal transparency of human consciousnesses

I see the biggest issue with the traditional agreement-based approaches to social comprehension in their underlining tacit, but questionable, assumption that I call the principle of *transparency among human consciousnesses*, which signals achievement in the process of comprehension. I define the principle of transparency of consciousnesses as an assumption of a partial or full overlap of consciousnesses—when the content of the subjective positions is more important than the unique authorship and personal ownership of these positions and the authors of these positions are mutually interchangeable. Both the fundamentalist and the constructivist agreement-based approaches imply that the subjectivity of the author and the subjectivity of the reader can overlap in principle on certain aspects of messages. And, thus, comprehension means the sameness of consciousnesses (in certain aspects). Rich and deep comprehension is supposedly achieved when agreement among engaged people has emerged. Transparency among consciousnesses is the endpoint of the comprehension. Of course, the two different agreement-based

approaches to comprehension (and their hybrids) view the content of this transparency a bit differently.

Fundamentalist and constructivist agreement-based approaches differ in what part of the human consciousness they assume overlaps. Fundamentalists assume that the author and reader's meaning content can overlap in the author and listener's consciousnesses, which is what fundamentalists call comprehension. For fundamentalists, human consciousnesses can be transparent in principle across the texts' stable meanings. Fundamentalists assume consciousnesses' transparency across the meaning content.

In contrast, constructivists assume that the author and reader's legitimacy of interpretative inference and meaning transcendence can overlap, which is what constructivists call comprehension. The constructivists assume that the people are basically the same but operate under different conditions and environments and have different tools and past experiences (Reddy, 1979; Wittgenstein, 2001). The author and the reader can draw different conclusions from the text, but the rules of drawing these different conclusions are the same for both of them. In constructivist agreement-based approach, transparency among consciousnesses manifests itself as agreement—the overlap of consciousnesses—across the legitimacy of each other's interpretative interferences and transcendences. Constructivists assume consciousnesses' transparency across the meaning generation strategies, while the message contents may be somewhat different to individual subjects.

The principle of transparency of consciousnesses implies the possibility of a bird's (or god's) eye's view of human consciousnesses (see an explicit example of this bird's eye's view model of comprehension in Reddy, 1979, pp. 292–294). Such a view purports to allow an “outsider” to compare content and/or the meaning generating capacity among people. People can be divided as more or less knowledgeable (for fundamentalists) or more or less capable of generating knowledge (for constructivists) (cf. the concept of “the zone of proximal development”, Vygotsky, 1978).

I see both a conceptual flaw and an ethical danger in the assumption of the principal transparency among consciousnesses. The conceptual flaw is based on relying on empirical observations of agreements, on prioritization of agreement over other discursive relations in some sociocultural practices, and on viewing agreement as the proxy for truth again in some sociocultural practices (e.g. in natural science making, Latour, 1987). However, an agreement is a complex relational and political artifact in itself (Bakhtin, 1986, 1999). Agreement is a special discursive activity of ignoring the differences and the local uniqueness of both context of the meaning and the meaning making process and abstracting similarities. Agreement generates temporary hegemonic power and exclusion, “every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 103). In addition, the agreement-based approaches to comprehension are culturally biased engendered by totalizing practices that prioritizing agreement-making activity over other activities.

I see an ethical danger in the transparency among consciousnesses assumption because under this assumption people become mutually interchangeable and therefore are viewed as replaceable (Matusov, 2011b). It implies that *I* need *the Other* only until *I* have fully understood *Him or Her*. As soon as *my* consciousness can consume the consciousness of *the Other* either via the meaning content and/or via the meaning generation process, *I* do not need *the Other*. Our consciousnesses converge at least partially. The more *I* become knowledgeable, the more *I* become independent of *the Other*, and the more *the Other* becomes redundant and unnecessary for *me*. *The understood Other* is redundant and, thus, can be eliminated. Perceived-to-be-fully-understood people are dispensable and replicable. In its extreme, the transparency of consciousness assumption leads to the Mono Consciousness Almighty—cf. The Absolute Spirit (Hegel & Baillie, 1967) or The World Reason (Ilyenkov, 1991). Arguably, politically, this assumption can lead to the totalitarianism and disrespect to lives of other people,—involving suicidal and homicidal tendencies of totalitarian regimes—in its extreme, or, at least, to political oppression.

An authorial dialogic approach to comprehension

In negative terms, an authorial dialogic approach to social comprehension rejects the assumption of transparency among human consciousnesses. It rejects the idea of the bird's eye's view from above on consciousnesses comparing them with each other.⁴ Rather, the authorial dialogic approach assumes addressivity and responsibility of one consciousness to another as the only possible relationship among consciousnesses. It also rejects the conviction that an agreement among authors, readers, listener, and observers of utterance/text/action/deed is a reliable proxy of their comprehension. An authorial dialogic approach insists that human consciousnesses are always opaque to each other but never opaque absolutely.

According to the principle of non-transparency, or opaqueness, of consciousnesses, consciousnesses always remain opaque to each other and cannot overlap. Agreement is a special relationship between consciousnesses that for different practical reasons are not interested in further investigation of the existing differences. One of the consequences of the principle of non-transparency/opaqueness of consciousnesses is considering truth as essentially dialogic in nature. In contrast to the principle of transparency of consciousnesses, where it is assumed that truth lives in individual statements like $2 + 2 = 4$, the principle of opaqueness of consciousnesses assumes that truth lives on boundaries of people's authorial positions, questions, and answers in a dialogue. Statements like $2 + 2 = 4$ gain their (mathematical) meanings and truths only when they are located in a dialogue among seriously interested people about math practice (and beyond). Paraphrasing Bakhtin, Matusov claims, "Truth does not have internal territory" (Matusov, 2014, January).

One might conclude from the previous statement, that human consciousnesses are never opaque absolutely, that human consciousnesses are both opaque and

transparent—it is a matter of degree—and, thus, the concepts of opaqueness and transparency are conceptually symmetrical to each other. I do not think so, because we have never have certainty about when our consciousnesses are transparent to each other, how, and to what degree. Metaphorically speaking, it is like a broken clock showing the exact time twice a day—we know that it is true but we do not know when exactly it happens. We can only guess and suspect its approximate time of correctness. Similarly, we can only guess and suspect the state of consciousness of the others and even our own without ever knowing where the boundary of our opaqueness and transparency lays for sure. This is why, in my view, the principle of the opaqueness among consciousnesses takes the *conceptual* primacy over the principle of transparency among consciousnesses. Although, consciousnesses of others are always partially transparent and partially opaque, opaqueness is primary. Mouffe articulates the primacy of dissensus over consensus, “I agree with those who affirm that a pluralist democracy demands a certain amount of consensus and that it requires allegiance to the values which constitute its ‘ethico-political principles’. But since those ethico-political principles can only exist through many different and conflicting interpretations, such a consensus is bound to be a ‘conflictual consensus’” (2000, p. 103). Disagreement, dissensus, conflict, misunderstanding, non-understanding, non-cooperation, and non-participation are primary over agreement, accord, understanding, and consensus.

The principle of the opaqueness of human consciousnesses has also *ethical* primacy over the principle of the transparency of/among consciousnesses because it promotes interest in and respect for the Other. If I can never fully know the consciousness of another person at any given moment for any given issue, I should treasure and be interested in the other person. The other person is always a riddle for me and will always remain a riddle,

... as an educator, I will deal not just with behavior of the child, but with a mystery of the child. I would know that any child has a mystery. Any genuine educator knows firmly that any child is a mystery. And this mystery will never be fully revealed and deciphered. And this is great. Similarly, I cannot decipher a mystery of a woman I love—that’s also good. God save us from living in the world of fully deciphered people! We don’t want to live in the world where other people’s consciousnesses are transparent and decoded to us—that would be the end of the world. The essence of a human is in that the human is always more than what we understand about him/her and it’s always true, regardless of the age of the person. When developmental psychology textbooks in all their totality describe one or two years old toddler, they actually do not describe anything important about the child (Lobok, 2014, translation from Russian is mine).

People are not mutually replaceable—they are unique. Each person is an unfinished and ever changing Universe. People can open to each other, while still remaining inexhaustible in their opaqueness. The more we engage with other people, the

more we can learn and guess about their consciousness without ever fully “getting them” in width or depth. The more familiar they are, the richer people become to us in their puzzling opaqueness. People essentially need each other not because they can become more powerful in fulfilling their own desires and can do together more than they can do alone. People essentially need each other not because they need to consume the consciousnesses of the others as much as possible. No. Rather, I argue, people need each other because they are lonely otherwise and need the others as their interlocutors whom they never fully understood and whose consciousness is unique and will always remain unique, opaque, and incomprehensible. The Mono-Consciousness Almighty is not only unachievable but also undesirable. I have coined the concept of “interaddressivity” to capture people’s inherent ontological interest in each other. It is a constant expectation to be surprised by another person (Matusov, 2011b). The authorial dialogic approach to comprehension shifts from “consciousness-as-it”, as it is in conventional approaches, to “consciousness-as-you” (cf. Buber, 2000).

A theory of comprehension is impossible without an underlining theory of meaning and meaning making. A traditional agreement-based approach to comprehension assumes that meaning (and truth) is located in statements that people make. For the agreement-based fundamentalists, meaning making involves correct, unambiguous, aggregation of smaller, more elementary units, into bigger and complex units of the statement: from letters to sounds, from sounds to morphemes, from morphemes to words, from words to sentences, from sentences to statements. For the agreement-based constructivists, meaning making involves mediation processes of inferences: a proof (in math), summarizing, questioning, activation of prior knowledge and experiences, grounding in the text, justifying, and so on. Lotman wrote, “The text is a generator of meaning, a thinking device, which requires an interlocutor to be activated” (1988, p. 40).

A dialogic theory of meaning making is different. It locates meaning in a dialogic relationship between a person who raises genuine, serious, interested question for which the person does not know the answer (i.e. so called “information-seeking question” Matusov, 2009)—and—another person who also takes the question seriously and replies to this question to the best of his or her knowledge, “With meaning I give answers to questions. Anything that does not answer a question is devoid of sense for us. . . . Meaning always responds to particular questions. Anything that does not respond to something seems meaningless to us; it is removed from dialogue” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 145). The genuine information-seeking questions are different from schoolish, answer-known, disinterested questions (e.g. “what does two plus two equal?”) that teachers often ask students to test them or reveal some preset logical structure (i.e. scaffolding) in conventional schooling. As Bakhtin wrote, “Question and answer are not logical relations (categories); they cannot be placed in one consciousness (unified and closed in itself); any response gives rise to a new question. Question and answer presuppose mutual outsideness. If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself,

it falls out of the dialogue and enters systemic cognition, which is essentially impersonal” (p. 169). Elsewhere I added,

Paraphrasing a famous quote about culture from Bakhtin (1999, p. 301), it is possible to say that meaning does not have internal territory: it is entirely distributed along the boundaries, boundaries pass everywhere, through its every aspect, the systematic unity of meaning extends into the very atoms of life of meaning. Meaning can be only transformed but never fully created from scratch. Meaning is not generated by “a thinking device,” as Lotman argued, but it is rooted in a dialogue to which participants contribute (Matusov, 2009, p. 120).

People’s knowledge and understanding are not fully comparable in a sense of putting them on some scale of quantity: *more* knowledge—*less* knowledge, *more* understanding—*less* understanding. Rather people know and understand *differently* across each other and inside of themselves across time. It is possible to ignore the differences and emphasize similarities by de-subjectivizing (monologizing) knowledge and understanding.

Like comprehension, thereby, knowledge has a social nature—knowledge partially collapses in presence of people who are not socialized in it (Matusov, 2009). This is similar to people who do not speak common language—their communicative skills partially collapse. That is why a teacher becomes always epistemologically ignorant, at least in part, about the subject he or she teaches with his or her students, who do not socialize in knowledge to which the teacher has access yet.

When I say that my reader understands me, it means that I, as an author of my own understanding, assign legitimacy or illegitimacy of my reader’s reply in the contexts of my questions, interests, worldviews, and relationship with this particular reader. In short, comprehension (or a lack of it) involves an authorial evaluative judgment about the legitimacy of reader’s/listener’s/observer’s reply to the writer/speaker/actor. In contrast to agreement-based constructivists, the criteria for the comprehension legitimacy never fully pre-exists the authorial judgment but rather it emerges and evolves in and with the process of comprehension itself. Even more, the established legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of the reader’s reply is always temporary and conditional depending on changing contexts of the writer’s emerging and changing questions, interests, worldviews, and relationships with the reader. This is how I interpret Bakhtin’s claim that understanding is bottomless (1986).

On the other hand, people can establish certain rigid regimes of comprehension where the criteria of legitimacy become stable and preset. For example, I may establish that only certain readers always provide illegitimate responses to my writing by the mere fact of who these readers are (e.g. non-scientists, monologists, and so on). Thus, I can preemptively claim a lack of understanding in those readers. Or, I can establish a rigid regime of comprehension by my agreement with a reader as the criterion of comprehension. Another example of a rigid regime of

comprehension is traffic signs and rules, where signs and rules require unequivocal action–response. Thus, a stop sign requires a car stop. In more sophisticated but still rigid regimes of comprehension, the preset criteria of legitimacy may involve certain structures of the readers’ replies such as, for example, topic-centeredness, mono-topic, preciseness, consensus-based, mono-discursivity, mono-genre and particular genre, and so on. However, I argue on a close analysis, even the most rigid regime of comprehension involves authorial evaluative decisions about legitimacy of reply that to some degree always transcend the preset given criteria of the legitimacy (e.g. traffic courts often decide cases of whether a car stops or does not stop at a traffic stop sign, see the phenomenon of “California stop”, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=california%20stop>). Again, the issue becomes how much agreement is manufactured in rigid regimes of comprehension by neglecting differences, creativity, and transcendence for the criteria of legitimacy. Essentially and deeply down (not on a surface), any rigid regime of comprehension remains authorial (cf. discussion of “bureaucracy” and “charisma” in Weber, 1947).

In a Bakhtinian dialogic approach to comprehension, the dialogic question–response cycle is never-ending social relationship that defines comprehension rather than the relationship of an agreement. Understanding of a text or another person is always partial and, fully belonging to unfolding dialogue, is never fully owned by the individual. At the same time, any individual interpretation is authorial. With the following educational case, describing my dialogic pedagogy for teaching preservice teachers of how to provide sensitive guidance to students who are culturally different than they are, I will abstract, analyze, and discuss the key features of a dialogic authorial approach to comprehension and their consequences for education.

Dialogic comprehension pedagogy example: “Which spider was your favorite character?”

One of the pedagogical challenges in teacher education is to help teachers from a mainstream culture to provide culturally sensitive and responsive guidance to their future minority students coming from a different discourse culture. Very often teachers from a mainstream culture see these minority students automatically as *deficient* because their culturally different students violate the mainstream cultural norms of discourse (Au, 1993; Heath, 1983, 1989; Michaels & Cazden, 1986). But, even more, even when the teachers from a mainstream cultures suspect or even *recognize a cultural difference*, rather than a deficit, is present in minority students, they often do not know how to guide these students because they do not know the discourse norms of the other culture. These mainstream teachers often feel helpless when faced with this challenge. Also, in these situations, the mainstream teachers are often concerned about stereotyping minority students, worrying about the automatic assumption that just because some students are students of color, these minority students must have different and/or certain cultural discursive norms.

To address the concerns of my undergraduate students, preservice elementary school teachers, mostly white middle-class suburban females (18–20 years old), I introduce a dialogic comprehension pedagogy approach to them. This approach guides teachers to focus on promoting authentic responses in the teachers themselves to their students' contributions rather than focusing on promoting any pre-existing cultural norms as the curricular endpoints preset by teachers in advance. According to this approach, it is not important for a teacher to know a minority student's cultural norm in advance of the lesson or be skillful in this approach. It is not important even to recognize "a cultural mismatch" (Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987) between a teacher's mainstream discursive culture and a student's minority discursive culture. Rather, a teacher should become genuinely, humanly, personally, interested (i.e. interaddressive) in a student and a student's contributions, regardless of a student's cultural style and mastery of genres. This is not always easy for teachers raised in conventional school institutional culture prioritizing asking known-answer questions and impersonal standards-based teaching. Below is a specific case that illustrates my dialogic comprehension approach.

To ontologically engage my undergraduate students in the teaching dilemma described above, I use a dialogic provocation that I have constructed based on Tyrone Howard's scholarship of African-American first grade boys' culturally diverse discourses (2002). Howard presented a case, in which a first grade teacher asked two African-American boys the same question, "Which spider was your favorite character?" after reading an African traditional tale "Añansi the spider: A tale from the Ashanti" (McDermott, 1977). The book is about Anansi the spider having six sons. All six spiders had diverse and mutually complementary talents. When the father got in trouble, getting lost and falling in a river, all of his six sons helped him using their talents in an accord with each other. After the father-spider was saved by his sons, he presented himself with a dilemma of which of his sons he should give a thank-you gift (the moon—"the beautiful globe of light"—that he found on the night sky) as a token of appreciation for his safe escape from the troubles. Since he could not decide which of his six sons with diverse talents helped him most, the moon is still on the night sky. The moral of the story seems to be people of diverse talents working together are equally valuable. Here is an exchange between the teacher and an African-American boy that I presented to my preservice teachers as "Mike" (Howard marked him as "Student 1"),

Teacher: Which spider was your favorite character?

Mike: Softy.

Teacher: Why?

Mike: Because he was soft and they needed him.

Teacher: Why was his role important?

Mike: Because he helped a lot.

Howard characterizes Mike's discourse as topic-centered, representing the US mainstream cultural discourse that exists in accordance with other scholars' observations (Au, 1993; Heath, 1983, 1989; Michaels & Cazden, 1986). For example, in one of the Delaware State⁵ Language Art Standards (Performance Indicator) states, "3.119—Students will be able to maintain a focus on a single topic." The teacher guides Mike through scaffolding, using triadic exchange discourse (the teacher's Evaluation-turn, involving partial approval of Mike's replies, seems tacit and mostly non-verbal combining with the teacher's next Initiation).

Here is a contrasting exchange between the teacher and another African-American boy that I presented to my preservice teachers as "Jamal" (Howard marked him as "Student 2"),

Teacher: Which spider was your favorite character?

Jamal: Well, I had about three or four of them that I liked, because some of them reminded me of different people. Cause at home I have two sisters and one brother, and my cousin Ree-Ree lives with us sometimes when her mom is not sick. I don't know why her brother Durrell doesn't come to our house but the Spider named "See Trouble" reminded me of Durrell. It seems like Durrell always knows when something is about to happen, but he never gets in trouble, but the rest of us do. My sister Dana is just like that spider named "Thirsty" she always likes to get everybody on her side of a story, but some time she can be mean, like the time she threw this bottle at my brother JJ because he would not leave her alone.

The teacher's response was to move on with her class discussion away from Jamal's contribution, tacitly disapproving Jamal's reply to the teacher's question. Howard argues that Jamal's discourse is not topic-centered. The teacher saw it as deficient, while Mike's topic-centered discourse was seen as advanced. Howard's observation and analysis are also in accord with other scholars' observations of how many teachers respond to non-mainstream cultural discourses (Au, 1993; Heath, 1983, 1989; Michaels & Cazden, 1986). Thus, in her classic study, Heath (1983) found that children from non-mainstream cultural communities have been socialized in adults' non-mainstream cultural discourses in their home and local communities. Elsewhere, I characterized a pattern of discourse similar to one presented by Jamal as "topic-mosaic" (Matusov & Hayes, 2000).

I usually started my dialogic provocation with presenting my preservice teachers with these two discourses by Mike and by Jamal and asking them, which of these two students was more advanced in English Language Art. I asked my preservice teachers to justify their judgments by focusing on strengths and challenges that the two boys presented in their replies to the teacher. With very few exceptions, my preservice teachers usually name Mike as more advanced because "it is much easier to follow him," "he is up to the point," "he is more logical," "he follows the teacher's instruction", "he is a better reader of the 'Añansi the spider' story", "he is more focused," and so on. As to Jamal, my preservice teachers often see

the following deficits in him, “Jamal is unfocused,” “it is difficult to follow him,” “he is mumbling,” “he cannot stay on with the text of the story,” “he is very confusing,” “he probably has an attention deficit disorder and requires medication,” “he is all over,” “he comes from a dysfunctional family,” “he is illogical,” “he may have developmental delay”, and so on. As a few strengths that they see in Jamal, “he has good vocabulary,” “he is very verbal,” “he uses rather complex, long, and full sentences,” “he is independent” (Mike was criticized by my students for being dependent on the teacher’s guiding questions), and so on. What was interesting for me that neither of my preservice teachers were engaged in substantive analysis of the two boys’ discourse, although I made the book “Anansi the spider” available to them. Rather they seemed to engage in cognitive and linguistic impersonal coding the boys’ discourses.

My preservice teachers also focused on the teacher’s guidance of the boys, often spontaneously without my prompt. Some of my preservice teachers criticized the teacher for not providing guidance to Jamal but some others praised the teacher for not openly discouraging Jamal and for letting Jamal become exposed to the teacher’s scaffolding of the other “more teachable” (their term) students like Mike.

That discussion naturally led to my dialogic provocation. I asked my students how they would guide students like Jamal and specifically how they would guide and reply to Jamal and his contribution presented above. Since we usually discussed cultural variations in oral and written discourses before this class topic, my preservice teachers switch readily to a cultural framework even though in their first and spontaneous analysis they used a deficit model in describing Jamal. Many of them said that to reply well to Jamal and to provide a culturally sensitive guidance a teacher would need to study his home culture and discourse patterns. And since they felt to be rather ignorant to this cultural discourse pattern of some African-American communities, they did not feel comfortable to guide Jamal. I asked them what they would do if they had a student like Jamal in their future classroom. Some suggested using special education, some suggested consulting with Jamal’s parents and experts who know his culture, and some suggested for themselves to actively learn all possible cultures of their future students from textbooks and experts of cultural discourses.

After discussing these interesting alternatives, I proposed the following exercise to them, “Imagine that you are at your family dinner party. You are sitting next to 6-year old African-American boy, Jamal. His mother is a friend of your parents. Imagine that you overheard a conversation between Jamal and his mom about the book ‘Anansi the spider’ and you hear Jamal’s reply to his mom’s question that is exactly what he said to the teacher. Do you think you would find his reply unusual and interesting? If so, what kind of interest might you have in his statement? What kind of questions would you ask him about what he said? Please try to avoid asking schoolish questions that you are not personally interested in.” I let my preservice teachers work in small groups of 4–5 for 7–10 minutes. After that as the whole class, we listened to the list of the questions developed by the groups and decided if a question was genuine and personally interested or disinterested and schoolish

involving a faked interest. In this exercise, I asked the preservice teachers to address Jamal as “you” and refer themselves as “I”. We also considered with my students if a fake question could be turned into an interesting question.

Questions that we considered fake usually were the following, “How old is Ree-Ree?” (who cares?!), “Why does Durrell remind you of ‘See Trouble’ spider?” (Jamal had already explained it), “Why did Dana throw a bottle at J.J.?” (Jamal had explained it), “What did you find attractive in ‘See Trouble’ spider and ‘Thirsty’ spider?” (Jamal already said that they reminded him his siblings and cousins, people he knew), and so on.

Questions that we found genuine and personally interested and ones that we thought might be potentially interesting for Jamal were the following (some of them):

- Did Dana hit JJ with a bottle or not? What happened then? Was JJ hurt? Scared? Was the bottle heavy and could harm JJ or light and not harmful when thrown at people? How did JJ bother Dana, what did he do? Did JJ apologize to Dana for bothering her? Was Dana punished by the adults for throwing a bottle at JJ? If so, how? Why is Dana so mean? How do other kids view Dana? Do you like Dana, if so why? How can we help Dana not to be mean? How old are Dana and JJ? Is she too young to understand the danger of throwing bottles at people? Why are people mean? What would you do when you are bothered by your brother JJ? Would you throw a bottle at him? Do you bother other kids sometimes, if so, why? What do you do to when people bother you?
- You said that Durrell could foresee troubles. What troubles: ones he created or some other kids created or troubles that nobody created? What kinds of trouble? Does Durrell create troubles but then avoids punishment by adults? Can you give an example of how Durrell can stay out of troubles? How do you think Durrell can foresee and avoid troubles? What is his secret? Can you foresee and avoid troubles? How? Do you think “See Trouble” spider created troubles but then knew how to avoid punishments or he really could see troubles that other people could get in without being involved himself?
- I still do not understand why your sister Dana reminds you of the spider named “Thirsty”. The Anansi book says about “Thirsty”, “Thirsty son was a river drinker.” But you said that Dana “likes to get everybody on her side.” What reminds you of Dana in Thirsty the spider? Is Dana thirsty to other people? Can you explain, please?
- You said that that your cousin Ree-Ree lives with your family when her mom is *not* sick. Why? It makes more sense to me, if Ree-Ree stays with your family when her mom is sick. When Ree-Ree’s mom is sick and cannot take care of Ree-Ree, it makes more sense for me that Ree-Ree is sent to your family to take care of her. Why do you think Ree-Ree lives with you when her mom is not sick? What is wrong with Ree-Ree’s mom when she is sick? Who else lives with Ree-Ree, her brother Durrell, and their mom? Who takes care of Ree-Ree

and Durrell when their mom is sick? What special talents does Ree-Ree have? What special talents do you have?

- Do you like the book “Anansi the spider?” Why? Why not? What specifically do you like about it? What specifically do you dislike about the book? Would you recommend your friends to read it? Why? Why not? What are your favorite books? Why? How do you find good new books to read? Do you like to read or not? Why?
- If you were Anansi the spider, whom of your six sons would you give the present of the beautiful globe of the light? Who do you think deserves most thanks from the father for saving him? Why? Why do you think the beautiful globe of the light is still in the sky?

Discussion of the authenticity of these questions generated interesting sharing among my preservice students (and me⁶) about their own lives (especially, relationship among siblings), kids’ cunning strategies of how to stay out troubles, kids’ meanness, issues of cognitive and volitional child maturity versus responsibility, the Anansi book, pedagogy and so on. For example, I remember a preservice teacher commented that after this exercise of generating questions of personal interests to Jamal, she realized that it would be more difficult to develop these questions for Mike. She hypothesized that in contrast to Jamal, Mike might be less engaged in the book and he might require more support from the teacher. Some of the classmates disagreed with this student arguing that the teacher’s question, “Which spider was your favorite character?” was not authentic and schoolish (why it should be matter for the students and, especially, for the teacher), perhaps making Mike more difficult to engage in a discussion of the book. My students often withdrew legitimacy of the teacher’s reply to Mike that they previously had given to her, claiming that the teacher probably did not understand Mike well. Another pedagogical issue, raised often by my preservice teachers, was: was it OK to have questions about Jamal’s life that may leave away from the book or should all questions be focused on the book? They often split on this issue and I helped to consider the issue by asking how they discussed with each other interesting books, movie, events, and so on.

In their evaluation of the exercise, my preservice students often appreciated the development of authentic, personal, interested questions by a teacher because these questions could provide guidance to Jamal and all students and might help the teacher learn more about Jamal and engage him deeper in analysis, aesthetics, and enjoyment of the book. They acknowledge that this dialogic comprehension approach allows for engaging people of diverse cultures in authentic learning with and about each other without necessarily their having to understand or even recognize precise cultural differences. As criticism of this dialogic comprehension approach, they usually raised issues of possible violation of students’ (and the teacher’s) privacy while sharing about their lives while discussing books, deviation from the topic of the lesson, losing control over students and the learning activity, and taking time from teaching the State Standards and

preparing for tests in the era of Teacher and Students Accountability (in the United States).

Coda: Key features of a dialogic comprehension approach

Bakhtin defined dialogic meaning making as a dialogic relationship between the genuine, personal, authentic question of one person seeking information and serious reply by another person in a never-ending dialogue. Following Aukerman (2007, 2013) and Bakhtin, I argue that comprehension is about authorial dialogic meaning making. Based on the example I provided, I can abstract the following key features of a dialogic comprehension approach.

Being authorial. Comprehension is always authorial and unique for its participants for the following reasons. By authorial, I mean *transcendence from the culturally and personally given* originated by the author and *recognized by relevant others and/or the author* him/herself (Matusov, 2011a; Matusov & Brobst, 2013). First, it involves *genuine personal interest* in other people and the topics of comprehension. This interest may be vague and initially underdeveloped. Comprehension involves *a personal bias*. It involves a personal attraction and/or repulsion to a particular issue for particular reasons or from particular experiences. Indifferent relations to a topic or another person cannot generate comprehension. The phrase, “objective comprehension”, if I take this wording literally and not as metaphor of being open-minded, is a misnomer. Objects cannot comprehend because they are dead and biasless. Only subjects can comprehend because they are alive and, thus, biased. Only biased subjects can create interest—the precondition of comprehension.

Second, authorial comprehension involves the *creativity* of transcending anything already given—given cultural norms, knowledge, practice, skills, attitudes, pre-existing legitimacies, and so on. In its own turn, this transcendence involves uncertainty and risk. Comprehension is risky. My students, preservice teachers, constantly comment about ontological dialogic pedagogy, how risky and dangerous authorial teaching may be by the teacher going into an uncharted territory, personal spaces, controversies, hot topics, touchy issues, disagreements, personal conflicts, fear of becoming rejected and disapproved, violation of the State educational standards, and uncertainty. On the positive side, authorship inspires and gives a sense of self-worth, ownership, authenticity, self-actualization, eventfulness, uniqueness, and feeling special—a sense of being alive.⁷

Third, the authorship of comprehension seeks *recognition of personal transcending* that will be given from relevant others and the self. Thus, my preservice teachers were usually eager to know which of their authentic questions real Jamal would accept as interesting and important and which he would ignore or reject as unimportant or uninteresting for him. They seemed to acknowledge that deep down only Jamal’s recognition would make their questions authentic and not fake—the class collective recognition of the authenticity of these questions was only an imperfect,

imaginary proxy for the real recognition of their comprehension authorship by the real addressee.

Fourth, authorial comprehension authorship involves *dialogic responsivity and addressivity*. Listening to my students' and my own discussion of authentic questions for Jamal, one could easily recognize that our contributions and questions reply to our past situations and people (as it is also clear from Jamal's own contribution involving replies to his past situations and people). At the same time, authorship tries to address other people. In the example above, my students were clearly addressing each other and me and Jamal and his teacher and Mike. They also heard voices of important people, who were not present in our class, but whom they tried to address. For example, some of my students, preservice teachers, were concerned about school administrators and the state officials promoting the State Curricular Standards and Accountability Tests. What would these powerful people say about a dialogic comprehension approach? What if they would disapprove of it? What should teachers do in the face of school administrators' disapproval of this approach? How to reply to them? At times, they also tried to address Jamal's parents and Jamal's local community.

Fifth, authorial comprehension authorship involves what I call *interaddressivity* (Matusov, 2011b)—the author's genuine interest in what others would say about the author's contributions and how they would reply to the author's questions. Another reason of why my students so wanted to meet with real Jamal was that they wanted to hear his answers to their authentic interested questions. Their desire for interaddressivity was so intense that many times we had to play out our imagining Jamal's possible answers. Imagining possible replies did not only exhaust but, in reverse, generated in us more interest in Jamal. I think it is because a dialogic approach to comprehension assumes an opaqueness of consciousnesses and, thus, promotes an inexhaustible interest in another.

Finally, sixth (and there can be other possible points I think), authorial comprehension authorship demands from the author *taking responsibility* for his or her own authorship. Transcending the given is *uncertain and risky* and, thus, it is charged by an ethic tension. Authorship is always a deed and event (Bakhtin, 1993). Others may question it, may ask for clarification, may ask for a proof, may disapprove it, may reject it, may ignore it, may misunderstand it, may blame the author, or even may agree with it for a wrong reason, according to the author, and so on. For example, many of my preservice teachers recognize that their interested, personal, and humane replies to students like Jamal may lead away from the Common Core Educational Standards prescribed by the State (in the United States). Their attraction to the dialogic approach to teaching and fear of the State's disapproval of this teaching led them into a professional moral dilemma: should they assume professional loyalty to their future students at expense of their job survival or should they assume professional loyalty to the State at expense of attending to educational needs of their students. The author takes *responsibility* for justifying his/her authorship-deed, while facing challenges charged by others and even by him/herself, by *responding* to these challenges.

Moving entirely away from these challenges, moving away from responding to these challenges, moving away from responsibility means moving away from the authorship itself (at least for the given audience), moving away from comprehension.

Heterodiscoursia and heteroglossia. Recently, I coined the term *heterodiscoursia* (Matusov, 2011b) as my clumsy effort to translate Bakhtin's Russian term "разноречье" (*raznorech'e*) in English that Bakhtin so often used in his writing. Unfortunately, this important term of Bakhtin's became a victim of an incorrect translation in French, Italian, and then English. Todorov (1984) blames a French structuralist Kristeva for mistranslating this term as "intertextuality" but unfortunately he did not offer a better, more accurate, term. My clumsy invention comes from two roots of different languages: the Greek work "hetero" and the Latin word "discourse" (with Greek ending). I modeled my invention from another term by Bakhtin that was rather well translated: "*heteroglossia*" or multivoicedness, although "hetero" refers to diversity and it is closer to the Russian word used by Bakhtin "разноголосье" (*raznogolos'e*, a compound word: "razno"—different, hetero in Greek; and "golos'e"—voice, gloss in Greek)—diversity of voices.⁸ As you see, I tried to make the terms parallel in their phonemic sound. *Heterodiscoursia* ("разноречье" *raznorech'e*, in Russian, another compound word: "razno"—different, hetero in Greek; and "rech'e"—speech, discourse in Latin) means "diversity of discourses."

After Bakhtin, I argue that any dialogic authorial comprehension involves heterodiscoursia and heteroglossia. Attempts to constrain, purify, and force comprehension to be mono-discursive, mono-voiced, mono-topic makes comprehension difficult if not impossible and, thus, dead. This was what many of my students commented about Mike's somewhat mono-discursive contribution later on, when they admitted that they did not know what Mike felt and thought about the book. They acknowledged that they did not feel much of Mike's comprehension authorship in his reply to the teacher, who seemed to rob comprehension authorship from Mike through her skillful scaffolding. Mike's short replies to the teacher's questions sound like almost reluctant, tooth-pulling. The teacher scaffolds Mike to her preset curricular endpoint—Mike's linear, text-justified, topic-centered answer. Heterodiscoursia and heteroglossia, although still present in Mike's replies to the teacher's scaffolding questions, are highly hidden. For example, I wonder how much Mike's theme of "help" involves revoicing adults who often emphasized it as important. How much was Mike doing the game (and discourse) of conventional schooling while replying to the teacher? How much of the theme of "help" was genuine in Mike's one?

In contrast, in Jamal's reply, his comprehension authorship was very vivid—heteroglossia and heterodiscoursia were very strong. Many of my students noticed in Jamal's reply and discussed heterodiscoursia (not in these terms, of course). They noticed an intersection of his discourse about the book (i.e. discourse-reminder, in which the story reminds him of familiar people) and his

discourse about his family (i.e. discourse-reckoning, in which Jamal apparently tries to reckon with interesting, problematic, and dramatic events of his family life). Some of my students questioned of how much this or any heterodiscoursia is legitimate in education—while introducing their own heterodiscoursia in our class discussion. On the one hand, the more heterodiscursive our class discussion was, the livelier, more eventful, and more memorable the class was. With time, many of my former students describe becoming nostalgic for the heterodiscoursia in our class discussions. On the other hand, some of my students were concerned with losing control over their future lessons, learning activity, and guidance (cf. Gallimore & Tharp, 1992). These observed tensions often led to discussions about the purpose of education and my students' educational philosophies and values.

As to heteroglossia in Jamal's reply, probably the most vivid example, noticed by my students, was how differently the book, Jamal, and my students used the word "troubles." The book seems to use this word in a sense of "mishaps", thus, See Trouble spider announced that his father, Anansi the spider, was in danger when the father got lost and fell down in a river. Jamal seems to revoice the word "troubles" with adults' familiar intonation and meaning when they would address kids' mischievous behavior, "he never gets in trouble, but the rest of us do". My students wanted to explore the ambiguity of this word and these diverse voices. This heteroglossia can create ever new possibilities for rich comprehension events between Jamal and my students (if they could have met at the time of Jamal's book reading).

Conclusions

Several scholars have accepted a duality of comprehension processes. In her influential paper, Rosenblatt (1982) argues that reading comprehension is often guided by two major different stances: *effere* (from Latin "to carry away") that focuses on factual information conveyed by the text and *aesthetic* (from Greek "to sense, to perceive") that focuses on a holistic response in a reader. The former is objective and impersonal and the latter is authorial, personal, and transcending. The former is often used in sciences, while the latter is often used in arts. Somewhat similar idea about the differences in comprehension existing in sciences (only natural sciences) versus arts (and so-called humanitarian sciences, including social sciences and humanities) was articulated by Bakhtin (1986). In describing the work of exact science, Latour (1987) introduces dualism of ready-made science (i.e. the espoused theory of science) and science-in-action. The ready-made science is involved in blackboxing the previously problematized and subjectivized statements about technology and nature by raising modality of statements. Meanwhile the science-in-action is involved in opening black boxes by lowering modality of statements.

Although I agree with Rosenblatt and Bakhtin that different practices have their own specifics with regard to comprehension, I argue that in all cases comprehension remains dialogic and authorial. Similarly, although I agree with Latour about the existence of both simultaneous phenomena—blackboxing and open black boxes,—I argue that blackboxing is epiphenomenon, being a particular version

of authorial dialogic comprehension. Even when people focus on inference of some factual information for a text or a an oral message, they are guided by their authorship of their questions involving such possible questions as: what, who, and how constitutes a fact for me and others; why it is important, for whom and for what; who cares and why; why I am focusing now on inferring facts and not on something else; and so on. As I showed elsewhere (Matusov, 2009) with an apparently simple math fact like $2 + 2 = 4$, its comprehension is bottomless, dialogic, and authorial.

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Notes

1. The concept of “constructivist” is polysemic in psychology and especially in education (see discussion of the diversity in constructivist approaches in Pegues, 2007; Phillips, 1995; Windschitl, 2002). Here I use the terms “fundamentalist” and “constructivist” loosely as heuristic metaphors for describing patterns of a particular approaches to comprehension. Their connection with the existing concepts in diverse fields is an interesting inquiry in itself but it is outside of the scope of this paper.
2. My illiterate grandmother was always telling her autobiographical stories differently each time she told her story which often very upset my highly literate relatives. When being asked why she was doing that, my grandmother replied that it is stupid to tell “the same” story recalled for very different occasions, to different people, and for different purposes. It seemed that stability of comprehension was not a value in her oral culture (Olson, 1994).
3. As one school administrator told to his teacher, “If you aren’t replaceable, it’s not good for the system” (Bryan Campbell, personal communication, 29 April 2013).
4. This conceptual move is analogous to a shift from the Newtonian mechanics of the absolute chronotope and bird’s eye’s vista to the Einsteinian relativism.
5. This was the state where my students, preservice teachers, and I were situated.

6. In part, in response to these discussions, I developed my own digital story about how as child I was learning cunning strategies to stay out of troubles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8GJ37iIiGM>
7. Ana Marjanovic-Shane wrote in her response to this paragraph, “The two feelings—of risking and fearing and feeling of self-worth and being alive are often mixed together—like a bittersweet chocolate” (personal communication, 20 April 2013).
8. In response to my paper, Carlos Cornejo (conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, 2 May 2013) made a very important point about distinguishing Bakhtin’s focus on voices–ideas and my focus on actual people in my analysis of comprehension, “Bakhtin does not directly address consciousness, but rather voices in the consciousness.” I accept this important difference between Bakhtin and me and attribute it to different material we work with. Bakhtin’s material was literary texts while mine are living people: students and teachers, non-reducible to voices–ideas. For example, for plot development, authors of novels can legitimately injure or even kill their characters (voices–ideas), which is unthinkable in the field of education. Cornejo claims that Bakhtin viewed consciousness in the third person (he/she/they) as voices. In contrast, I address it as the second person (you). This discussion is worth of expanding (see Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014).

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