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# The Bakhtin Circle's dialog in Vietnam

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In this article, we use Jacques Derrida's deconstructive method to study the influence of Mikhail Bakhtin in Vietnam in the 1990s and 2000s. By using evaluations of Bakhtin by researchers in Vietnam and around the world, we argue that he is not the only owner of the theory of dialog and polyphony. His friends, Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Voloshinov, also played important roles in defining these concepts. The Bakhtin Circle's dialog theory is related to the sense of democracy in society. The work of Bakhtin was introduced to Vietnam in the 1980s and led to a "Bakhtin fever" throughout Vietnam. However, he has been less overrated recently. We also discover a mistake in the dialogic theory of the Bakhtin Circle. The members of the Circle said that the nature of language is dialogic, which means that whenever language is used, either in literature or in common life, it is always polyphonic. Based on this claim, novels use language to tell stories, so novels are polyphonic. The Bakhtin Circle was mistaken when labeling Dostoevsky's novels as polyphonic and Tolstoy's novels as monologic. In the same vein, the Bakhtin Circle strongly believed that language in poetry is always monologic. We think this claim is also wrong. Dialogicality appears in all kinds of poetic languages.

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## Introduction

Bakhtin was a philosopher who is admired by Vietnamese literary researchers. Introduced in Vietnam in the late 1980s, Bakhtin's theory of dialog gradually replaced the Marxist-style sociological criticism that prevailed in Vietnam at that time. For the next 2 decades, Bakhtin's theory dominated the Vietnamese academic community. In a country with a tradition of excessive personality cults, Vietnamese literary critics saw Bakhtin as an idol. What Bakhtin said was deemed absolutely correct until the 2000s, when there appeared to be a reassessment of Bakhtin in Vietnam. The first problem was the issue of copyright. Many people are skeptical of Bakhtin's claim to have written chapters for his two friends Voloshinov and Medvedev. Is dialog theory his own creation? Is polyphony theory truly correct? Is poetry merely a monologue? We clarify these issues.

**Theory of dialog belongs to Bakhtin or the Bakhtin Circle.** We begin with the definition of *dialog*. According to *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics and Linguistics* (Ponzio, 2005, p. 181), the father of *dialog* and the *dialogic* method was the Greek philosopher Socrates (469–399 BC). Although Socrates did not specify what the *dialogic* method includes as the Bakhtin Circle did, he did deliver lectures in a dialogic way to produce knowledge. Mikhail Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle inherited this thought and developed it into the theory of dialog.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), who was greatly approved during the decade of the 1990s and the years after that in Vietnam, is certainly one of the geniuses that have had significant impacts on modern and postmodern research in the literature. Especially in Vietnam, Bakhtin's appearance is thanks to the works of Tran Dinh Su, who not only applied Bakhtin's theory but also, to a certain extent, developed a branch of poetic studies called *Vietnamese poetics* (Tran, 2017). The enormous contribution of the Bakhtinians to the Vietnamese academy is a change in the mode of theoretical thought in literature studies. Thanks to that, the once-popular sociological approach to literature has been replaced by an approach that focuses on the beauty of language, giving literature its own independent voice, avoiding sometimes ridiculous critics.

No Vietnamese scholar met Bakhtin, yet he has been so popular in the field that any research that does not quote him would be regarded as scientifically underqualified. Bakhtin has even been considered a multipurpose key to any literary research. However, the great adoration of Bakhtin in Vietnam gradually faded with the reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Thanks to their excellent reputations, Bakhtin and his friends have remained well known in literature studies, especially in philosophy.

While Tran Dinh Su and Pham Vinh Cu have given the highest recommendation to the personal role of Bakhtin in poetics in Vietnam since the 1990s, Ngo Tu Lap is the person who, during the 2010s, made great efforts to develop a more balanced view of Bakhtin in Vietnam through his access to French and Russian written materials.

At the beginning of his studies, Ngo Tu Lap displayed great admiration for Bakhtin in certain papers such as *Bakhtin Circle—the Predecessors of Postmodernism* (Ngo and Ngo, 2011). He considered himself a Bakhtinian. Then, in 2014, in the paper *Đọc sách “Lột mặt nạ Bakhtin—câu chuyện về một kẻ lừa dối, một chuyện bịp bợm và một con mèo sáng tập thể”* (Reading “Bakhtin démasqué—Histoire d'un menteur, d'une escroquerie et d'un délire collectif”), he concluded that Bakhtin was wrong when he claimed authorship of some parts of his friends' books. He also states that Bakhtin has “stolen” the thoughts in works of V.N. Voloshinov and P.N. Medvedev, who passed away well before Bakhtin did.

Ngo Tu Lap said, “There are many reasons to cast doubt on this. First of all, there is a significant difference in style between the works signed by Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Voloshinov. Bakhtin's works are often confusing, obscure, loose, and even self-contradictory. Meanwhile, Medvedev's *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics* and Voloshinov's works are very coherent and consistent in thought” (Ngo, 2014, p. 64). In *Answering journalist Thuy Khue*, who criticizes his misunderstanding of Bakhtin, Lap does not agree and concludes, “Voloshinov and Medvedev are the ones who have been most plagiarized by Bakhtin” (Ngo, 2016).

Tran Dinh Su and La Nguyen disapproved of Ngo Tu Lap and the book written about Bakhtin by Jean-Paul Bronckart and Cristian Bota. They said, “This book by two Swiss authors clearly did not set out with an objective purpose of research but only to defame, even smear Bakhtin not only academically but also personality to cause a shock. The title of their book speaks to that itself. Ngo Tu Lap's article showed that he stood on the side of these two authors in summarizing their views. He called the book “a bomb.” He insisted that upon hearing the explosion of this bomb, many people would definitely be “startled.” He thought that if this book by two Swiss authors causes immature and weak people to be “startled”, then after this initial reaction, people will be calmer and less startled” (Tran and La, 2014).

To defend Bakhtin, Tran Nho Thin in *About the wrong “bomb”* criticizes Ngo Tu Lap by quoting Sergei Zenkin: “In general, serious document gaps, misinterpreted passages and misinterpretations, oppressive inferences and logistic mistakes in Bronckart and Bota's book have transformed the analysis of the text in this book—a very meticulous analysis, but having lost credibility because of the prejudice of the conclusions—has become worthless” (Tran, 2014).

In fact, if we read the books of Voloshinov and Medvedev, we easily recognize the similarity of their ideas with those of Bakhtin in their theory of dialog. Therefore, if Bakhtin was not a thinker who wrote this theory for Voloshinov, then the concept of dialog was introduced by Voloshinov. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Voloshinov clearly analyzes the contents of “dialog”: “Orientation of the word toward the addressee has an extremely high significance. In point of fact, *word is a two-sided act*. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*. Each and every word expresses the “one” in relation to “other.” I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong” (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 86). In this interpretation, we can see the clear conception of dialog in words. Voloshinov understood how a word got its meaning. However, having had the same thought as Bakhtin, he actually pays more attention to the “subject” of words. He is uninterested in the independence of words in producing meaning themselves. He said, “A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee. A word is territory shaped by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor” (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 86). From this view, Ngo Tu Lap proposes replacing the “Bakhtin Circle” with the “Voloshinov Circle” (Ngo and Ngo, 2015, p. 35).

There is an international debate over whether Bakhtin is a talentless copier who does not personally own any theoretical thoughts on dialog or polyphony. Ngo Tu Lap may not be entirely wrong, but his statement raises another sharp criticism of *the Bakhtin issue*.

In our opinion, this is not difficult to understand. Historically, human beings have tended to promote one idol and then to move

on to promote another idol. This reflects the rule of advancement. Bakhtin's fame, once it reaches its peak, will be deconstructed when more researchers cover the weak points in his theory. In this era of rapid change and new discoveries, as multicultural democracy comes closer to its nature, there is little chance for any scholar to remain in his or her position of fame for long. All "greatness" is framed by its limitations. There is no perfect greatness. Bakhtin's theory, or that of his group, is not an exception. With regard to the statement that Bakhtin copied his friends, we do not yet have enough evidence for a final conclusion. Moreover, the fact that Bakhtin was a friend of these two scholars alone is enough to believe in his intellectuality. Finally, since the three scholars have all passed away, there can be no final conclusion, so we are temporarily considering all thoughts and ideas related to Bakhtin as belonging to the Bakhtin Circle. From now on, when Bakhtin is mentioned, we mean the group.

In the West, Terry Eagleton is a typical example of those who praise and give great honor to Bakhtin: "One of the most important critics of Saussurean linguistics was the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who, under the name of his colleague V. N. Voloshinov, published in 1929 a pioneering study entitled *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Bakhtin had also been largely responsible for what remains the most cogent critique of Russian Formalism, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, published under the names of Bakhtin and P. N. Medvedev in 1928" (Eagleton, 1998, p. 101).

On the other hand, Craig Brandist in *The Bakhtin Circle—Philosophy, Culture and Politics* introduced other ideas. He used the notion of "The Bakhtin Circle" and wrote, "It is appropriate to discuss this aspect of Voloshinov's work separately from the main part of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* because archival evidence shows that this section of the book was originally conceived as a separate project to be called 'The Problem of the Transmission of Alien Discourse [*chuzhaia rech*]: An Experiment in Sociolinguistic Research'" (Brandist, 2002, p. 89).

Frank Farmer also focuses on the issue of "the ever perplexing debates regarding Bakhtin's whole or partial authorship of works attributed to two members of his circle, V. N. Voloshinov and Pavel Medvedev" (Farmer, 1998, p. xii). Greg Marc Nielsen, although he distinguished between Bakhtin and Voloshinov, still acknowledged Bakhtin's contributions to the concepts of *heteroglossia* and *dialogism*. "Both Bakhtin and Voloshinov see the center of the utterance as the scene for a battle over the ownership of the word" (Nielsen, 2002, p. 70).

Similar to those in Vietnam, researchers around the world initially considered dialog theory to belong to Bakhtin, but later, they considered it as belonging to the Bakhtin Circle. Furthermore, they have identified the origin of that theory. Craig Brandist argued that the origins of dialog theory come from German researchers: "the Vossler school was very important for the Circle". He explains, "Voloshinov draws heavily on a collection of articles published in German in honor of Karl Vossler in 1922 entitled *Idealistische Neuphilologie (Idealist Neophilology)*. Bühler's article on syntax, which Voloshinov translated, first appeared here, and there are several other articles that proved crucial to the development of Voloshinov's, and later Bakhtin's, work" (Brandist, 2002, p. 89).

Vietnamese Bakhtinians do not study Bakhtin's theoretical origins. This shows that the cult of personality in Vietnam is very strong, especially because while the world tends to credit the "Bakhtin Circle" for the theory of dialog, in Vietnam, the Bakhtin worshipers (Tran Dinh Su, 2020, for example) still do not mention Voloshinov and Medvedev when studying dialog theory.

Ignoring the praise that Terry Eagleton gave to Bakhtin and the fact that V. N. Voloshinov is V. N. Voloshinov and not a name that Bakhtin borrowed, as misreported by Eagleton and others, one can see the irreplaceable contributions of Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle to semiotics. The Bakhtin Circle's point about the practical use of language, to some extent, exhibits characteristics of existentialism by saying that the meaning of language depends on *the speaker or writer and the moment and purpose of use, in the negotiation of the receiver*. Edward Quine quotes the Bakhtin Circle's words, "The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly oriented toward a future answer word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction" (Quinn, 2006, p. 117).

Most researchers tend to distinguish between Bakhtin and his two friends. In Russia, according to Ngo Tu Lap, Bakhtin's collaborations did not include books authored by Voloshinov and Medvedev. This suggests that Russians are also very cautious about Bakhtin's copyright issues. Some of the more neutral English-American researchers put them into a group of three called the "Bakhtin Circle". In *The Bakhtin Reader* (Morris, 2003), for example, the author clearly names Bakhtin's friends in the excerpts. This is a necessary caution and shows the researcher's respect for intellectual property rights.

In Vietnam, the wild passion for Bakhtin has not yet come to an end. Researchers in the 1980s and 1990s tended to give Bakhtin credit for the theories of dialog and polyphony. It comes as no surprise that Ngo Tu Lap and those who distinguished between Bakhtin and Voloshinov and Medvedev all came under fierce criticism from Bakhtin's followers. We endorse this distinction and acknowledge the authorship of Voloshinov and Medvedev of their own works.

**"Subject" of dialog and "democracy" of words.** Immediately after World War I, humanity experienced a peak of existential pressure for change and an awareness of individuality that pushed for the implementation of democracy. The theoretical nature of the Bakhtin Circle's works also addresses the issues of democracy and equality for human beings. On that topic, the Bakhtin Circle promotes practical use and the freedom to create meaning in the usage of language. Human beings are the subject of that usage. Therefore, in specific communicative environments, language produces a specific meaning, reflecting the interdependence between the user and language itself. The Bakhtin Circle mentions this but, in fact, focuses on the status and destiny of human beings. Whatever level of democracy that language itself can reach is not important if it is not democracy for humans. As in the end, a language is just the tool used to express human thoughts, no one will fight for the equality of a particular word like "the plow", "the hoe", or another linguistic tool. The democracy of language is, therefore, the democracy of human beings.

The Bakhtin Circle wanted the independence of language to be equal to that of human beings. Here, it is worth noting that any linguistic philosopher, not just Bakhtin, would also place the practical (or even pragmatic) character of language in a place of prominence. Language is only itself in its use: "The meaning of a word is its use in language" (Wittgenstein, 1986, p. 20e). Such philosophers define language broadly, referring to anything that provides "meaning" and "content" to communicative partners or communities in specific contexts. From the birth and existence of language, these philosophers see this definition as a similar to the existence of human beings.

The Bakhtin Circle's linguistic ideology is uniquely revolutionary. Their "dialog" involves both the nature of the language and the "conscious" (or "unconscious") intentions of the users, which are subject to the inevitable influence of the ability of the

receivers to acquire those intentions and to the inherent power of the language itself as an entity of “meaning” that has been defaulted over time. Literary work, because of language, inevitably has a dialogic nature, but that nature is only a small “unconscious” piece that does not cover the Bakhtin Circle’s view. Only when writers consciously create dialogs by “respecting” the language of the narrators and the characters (and the readers) in their works will dialogicality truly appear, and such works, of course, have the feature of polyphony.

It can be said that although the Bakhtin Circle has had success in literature studies, they would likely be prominent as global scholars for their spirit of democracy, both in terms of words and life, of which the core is to oppose “monologue”, a “shining unique center”, etc. This characteristic is the restless movement of things in essence, is the desire of things to speak with their own voices, is constantly searching for the existential essence of all things and phenomena, and more importantly, is the desire of all existences that are both independent of and dependent on each other through “dialogicality”, to respect, to understand, to be democratized, and to live better together.

Before the Bakhtin Circle’s dialog theory was introduced into Vietnam, sociological criticism dominated journals. Vietnamese critics value a work based on its ability to reflect reality, and many works fall into the category of secular sociology. Therefore, in the decades of the 1990s and 2000s, the dialogic thought of the Bakhtin Circle was well received and had a great impact on literary research. It helped creators and readers gain deeper insight into literary beauty and democratic ability in the reception of art. More importantly, the 1986 economic reforms in Vietnam promoted democracy in both literary studies and society.

**Two mistakes in the Bakhtin Circle’s theory of dialog.** In terms of philosophy, Bakhtin is considered a “Russian philosopher and cultural theorist whose influence is pervasive in a wide range of academic disciplines—from literary hermeneutics to the epistemology of the human sciences, cultural theory, and feminism” (Jung, 1999, p. 70). Edward Quine defines the concept of dialogism as “A term associated with the work of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who maintained that any specific utterance is a contribution to a continuing human dialog—that is, it is both a response to past uses of the language and an occasion for future uses” (Quinn, 2006, p. 117). Related to the Bakhtin Circle’s success, there is also a concept of *dialogic criticism*, which has been defined as follows: “To Bakhtin, a literary work is not (as in various *poststructural* theories) a text whose meanings are produced by the play of impersonal linguistic or economic or cultural forces, but a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse, each of which is not merely a verbal but a social phenomenon, and as such is the product of manifold determinants that are specific to a class, social group, and speech community” (Abrams and Harpham, 1999, p. 77).

In Vietnam, in addition to Tran Dinh Su, Pham Vinh Cu is another major contributor to the popularity of Bakhtin’s works. Pham Vinh Cu is interested in the nature of dialog. He wrote, “In Bakhtin’s humanistic philosophy, “dialog” is the foundational category. Phrases such as “conversational dialog” and “dialogic relations” have both universal meaning and emotional meaning. Dialog is the essence of consciousness and the nature of human life. [...] Living means participating in dialogs such as asking, hearing, answering, and agreeing.” (Bakhtin, 1992, p. 12). Additionally, in his introduction, Pham Vinh Cu further analyzes Bakhtin’s dialogic theory: “Our words, with all the characteristics and nuances, depend not only on what we want to say but also on the person we talk to. That is the simplest example of the internal dialog of words” (Bakhtin, 1992, p. 18).

The above studies show that the concept of dialog, according to Bakhtin’s usage, is the opposite of the concept of monologue. This conclusion becomes clear when Bakhtin investigates language and literary discourses through the inner voices of the artwork; he proposes that literary discourse, namely, discourse in the modern novel, always tends to attack the power of the uniquely dominant voice. In his essay *Dostoevsky’s Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment*, Bakhtin compares two novel discourses representative of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, which has led to heated debates among critics.

Bakhtin said, “Dostoevsky’s particular gift for hearing and understanding all voices immediately and simultaneously, a gift who’s equal we can find only in Dante, also permitted him to create the polyphonic novel. The objective complexity, contradictoriness and multivoicedness of Dostoevsky’s epoch, the position of the declassed intellectual and the social wanderer, his deep biographical and inner participation in the objective multilevelness of life, and finally, his gift for seeing the world in terms of interaction and coexistence—all this prepared the soil in which Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel was to grow” (Bakhtin, 1999, pp. 30–31). He asserts that Dostoevsky’s novels are polyphonic (multiple-voiced), while Tolstoy’s novel discourse is monologic. “For Tolstoy, the very problem does not even arise; he has no need to stipulate the fantastic nature of his device. Tolstoy’s world is monolithically monologic; the hero’s discourse is confined to the fixed framework of the author’s discourse about him” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 56). The assertion of Tolstoy’s monologicality is especially repeated by Bakhtin: “As we have seen, there are no dialogic relationships between characters and their worlds. However, the author does not relate to them dialogically either. A dialogic position with regard to his characters is quite foreign to Tolstoy. He does not extend his own point of view on a character to the character’s own consciousness (and in principle he could not); likewise, the character is not able to respond to the author’s point of view” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 56).

Perhaps Bakhtin does not mean to underestimate the talents and values of the specific discourses of two great writers but to point out their differences. In doing so, Bakhtin affirmed that “dialog” is an inevitable trend in modern literature. By this dialogic characteristic, each written work is not only a conversation with previous works and their authors but also with later works. The problem is not only the response—mocking, jeering, or extending the writing of the previous work—but also regularly showing traces of the previous work in the work being done. Therefore, “writing” is a dialog with what “has been written” and what “has not yet been written”. The consequence is that there are many types of voices. From this issue of voice, Bakhtin actually proposed the intersubjective nature of literary creativity, a concept appreciated by many researchers. Later, Kristeva took this concept as the basis for proposing intertextuality.

The concept of “dialog” began to appear in 1918, popularized in works by the group later known as the Bakhtin Circle, but it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that these works were translated and popularized in the West. Thus, the Bakhtin Circle’s influence on the West began in the postmodern period, when issues of equality, freedom, and democracy were being raised. The categories of decentering and the central-periphery attracted much attention. The appearance of the Bakhtin Circle reinforced the determination for change of the postmodernists, who rejected the old and the backward. The spirit of dialog in the theory of these researchers contributed to the further elimination of the strong hold of obsolescence that humanity needs to remove on its journey of life. At that time, some Western researchers compared Bakhtin’s dialog with T. S. Eliot’s *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, in which this English poet cum literature theorist stressed

that in literary discourse, “the reality” replaces “the past” as much as “the reality” is guided by “the past.” The theory of both Bakhtin and T. S. Eliot assumes that each discourse has a history of use and that it must respond to previous usages and envision future usages. In short, to survive, a discourse needs to be continuously communicated, expressed, and replaced.

The Bakhtin Circle’s concept of dialog is not limited to literary language. As philosophers, the views of the Circle members are much broader. Bakhtin argued that dialogs exist in all forms of language, even in thought, because the nature of thinking is always dialogic. Languages always exist in a complex dialogic network rather than a vacuum, and that process lasts forever.

We believe that literary language is dialogic, but there are many different levels of that dialogicality. For example, in Dostoevsky’s text, the dialogicality is bold, while the dialogicality in other writers’ texts may be paler, such as those of Chekhov or Tolstoy. For journalistic texts, the dialogic elements are greatly reduced because they have been stripped down of their fictional aspects. The most typical monologue is found in the imperative form. Command discourse always rejects “disobedience” or superior resistance.

Thus, if “polyphony” in the Bakhtin Circle’s literary theory is directed toward novels, the dialogs of those novels are within the philosophical scope of polyphony; it can be applied to any human linguistic or thinking pattern. Therefore, dialogs are the foundation for the creation of double-voicedness in literary works. From here, we can say that all literary discourses are conversational or dialogic (Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* is also dialogic), but according to the Bakhtin Circle’s view, Dostoevsky was the only one to reach the level of polyphony or double-voicedness.

The Bakhtin Circle also paid attention to the nature of words in “the process of activity”. They claimed that it is in communication alone that language carries its specific meaning: “Therefore, there is no reason for saying that the meaning belongs to a word as such. In essence, meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding. Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the *effect of interaction between speaker and listener produced via the material of a particular sound complex*. It is like an electric spark that occurs only when two different terminals are hooked together” (Morris, 2003, p. 35).

Talking about “language”, the Bakhtin Circle actually focuses on the use of words, unlike other language philosophers (Wittgenstein, for example) who were interested in language itself as a living entity. In the Bakhtin Circle’s thought, words seem to live on the border between the context of the author and that of the reader. “I” and “other” are used especially to distinguish “subjects” in the Bakhtin Circle’s theory. Because of this, the group’s theory has some contradictory points. On the one hand, the Bakhtin Circle argues that dialog is the basis of polyphony, acknowledging that the narrative words of Tolstoy are also very “internally dialogic”, as they are conversationalized through both the subject and the characters. “Such characters as Andrei Bolkonsky, Pierre Bezukhov, Levin, and Nekhlyudov have their own well-developed fields of vision, sometimes *almost* coinciding with the author’s (that is, the author sometimes sees the world as if through their eyes), their voices sometimes *almost* merge with the author’s voice” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 72). On the other hand, Bakhtin did not consider Tolstoy’s novel to be polyphonic like Dostoevsky’s novels, “All of them, with their fields of vision, with their quests and their controversies, are inscribed into the *monolithically monologic whole* of the novel that finalizes them all and that is never, in Tolstoy, the kind of ‘great dialog’ that we find in Dostoevsky” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 72). It

might have been more rational if the Bakhtin Circle would have limited this assertion to the framework of “more multiple-voiced” and “less multiple-voiced”.

Regarding poetic language, we hold a different opinion from that of the Bakhtin Circle. That is, “dialog” also appears in “poetic words”. In their works, the Bakhtin Circle always denies the existence of dialog in poetry and shows a certain fondness for novels (regarding which, Michael Holquist stated that “he [Bakhtin] is a baggy monster” (Holquist, 1981, p. xviii)). They make a great effort to discuss dialog in novels without believing that poetic language has the same dialogic function. They claim that “The language in a poetic work realizes itself as something about which there can be no doubt, something that cannot be disputed, something all-encompassing. Everything that the poet sees, understands and thinks, he does through the eyes of a given language, in its inner forms, and there is nothing that might require, for its expression, the help of any other or alien language. The language of the poetic genre is a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed. The concept of many worlds of language, all equal in their ability to conceptualize and to be expressive, is organically denied to poetic style” (Holquist, 1981, p. 286). The Bakhtin Circle said that the lyrical character of poetry coincides with the poet and that the character’s voice has no dialog with the poet, so poetic utterance is forever a monologue. Their interpretation is that “the poet is not able to oppose his own poetic consciousness, his own intentions for the language that he uses, for he is completely within it and therefore cannot turn it into an object to be perceived, reflected upon or related to. Language is present to him only from inside, in the work it does to effect its intention, and not from outside, in its objective specificity and boundedness” (Holquist, 1981, p. 286). This view of the Bakhtin Circle is clearly mistaken.

The Bakhtin Circle exploits “dialog” at the “textual” level and on the subject of “utterance”, but not in terms of signs. They pay more attention to the “subject” of the word. In our opinion, dialog (and we use the term *dialogicality* to emphasize the quality of dialog) should be studied at the lowest level, below the “sentence” level, the level of “sign”. We believe that even a single sign (or word in a literary text) can have a certain dialogicality because it must compete with other signs/words to “protect” or “show” its “meaning”. Without this competition and internal struggle for “meaning”, the sign (or word) does not exist. Thus, the struggle for meaning or the nature of dialog is not only done on the surface of the artistic text through “subjects” but is made through the interiority of the signs themselves. Whenever an author uses the signs of a language, the text can become a dialogic work, even if it is a novel, a short story or a poem.

## Conclusion

Being the focal point of Vietnamese literary criticism for the last decades of the 20th century, the influence of the Bakhtin Circle’s theory of dialog has gradually been narrowed. The name Bakhtin is still venerated, although as the father of the theory of dialog. This is the stubbornness of some Vietnamese researchers.

From the perspective of dialogic subjectivity, the Bakhtin Circle did not complete the dialog they set up. The clear drawback is their ignorance of the nature of the meaning of signs and their special fondness for only one type of sign, the “dialogic subject”. The Bakhtin Circle did not appropriately evaluate modern “lyric poetry” when saying that the poetic style does not interact with others’ words, does not acknowledge others’ words. The members of the Circle somehow forgot the core principle that a text of any given kind, whether artistic or common, is the product of both a community (the cultural community) and individuals (with

unique characteristics in communicative contexts, according to the official meaning of context). The fact that the Bakhtin Circle did not take the dialogicality of poetry into account shows the shortcomings of their arguments. It is more appropriate to say that all texts, words, or factors that construct meaning, including people's words in communication, have dialogicality. The Bakhtin Circle focuses only on the role and function of the "subjectivity" of dialog rather than on aspects of the intersignality (Dao and Le, 2019, p. 239) of the words. Again, we can conclude that the language of poetry or of any kind of literature implies dialogicality.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Additional information

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