

## THE *THEME* CONCEPTION IN BAKHTIN'S AND HIS CIRCLE'S WORKS

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- **ABSTRACT:** The study of meaning is one of the most complex problems in Linguistics, according to Bakhtin's and his Circle's assumptions. In the meantime, the theme, one of the key concepts, although not the most studied by the Circle, becomes essential for the understanding of language as a concrete action. This bibliographic article aims to discuss, epistemologically and theoretically, the concept of the theme as well as the concepts in the Circle's works, specifically, Bakhtin's, Volochínov's and Medviédev's. To this end, the text resumes the considerations about the *theme* in these authors' works, to observe its deployment over the years. Results show that there are variations in the concept, which made it possible to understand some trends in their understanding: (1) *theme* as the total meaning of the utterance, the event, the reality and the moment in which content and form interact axiologically; (2) *theme* such as the relationship between meaning and value of the ideological sign; and (3) *theme* as the object of the utterance.
- **KEYWORDS:** Theme; Bakhtin's circle; total meaning of the utterance; relationship between meaning and valuation; object of the utterance.

### Introduction

The *theme* is constituted by interaction and it includes historical, cultural and social aspects. When enunciating, the subject resorts to other utterances; (s)he adapts his speech to the enunciative conditions, to the linguistic system (or other semiotic modality), in order to build his/her project of speaking, giving it meaning and seeking an active reaction-response from the other. Vološinov (1973 [1929]) already considered the problem of meaning to be one of the most difficult in Linguistics, a fact that is reaffirmed by other scholars of language (BRAIT, 2019; BOENAVIDES, 2015; CEREJA, 2005).

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Although the concept of *theme* is not the most studied in the Circle, it is fundamental for the understanding of language as a concrete act.

In view of this, the general objective of this article is to discuss, epistemologically and theoretically, the concept of *theme* and related concepts in Bakhtin's and his Circle's studies. For this purpose, the bibliographic scope of this study goes through some of the Circle's works, in order to observe how the act of meaning is an understanding of the *theme* in each of them.

This text is chronologically organized according to the original versions, making references (or referring) to the texts of the Circle. Afterwards, a discussion section is presented dealing with possible dialogues between the texts, in order to characterize the aforementioned key concept for the Circle.

### ***Theme and its development in Bakhtin Circle's works***

Bakhtin's Circle was "a group of intense and fine-tuned collaboration, in a friendly atmosphere in common research, based on different interests and competences" (PONZIO, 2011, p. 46, our translation).<sup>1</sup> There was a collective work in the discussion of the themes and, although many times the text was "under the responsibility of an author, it was not the authorship that interested the group" (GERALDI, 2013, p. 13, our translation),<sup>2</sup> which generated doubts regarding the formal authorship of some of the writings.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the problem of authorship, there is also the arrival of works in the West, without any chronological order in their dissemination. Public awareness of the Circle's works has not kept up with the publication chronology in the original versions. Besides, numerous translations have been released, in different languages, which has caused terminological fluctuation (BRAIT, 2006), since the translator performs the translation act from a set of cultural and theoretical references, which do not always adequately account for the text to be translated.

In reading the texts, focusing on the unfolding of the theme and other related concepts, we follow the writing chronology of the original versions (Chart 1). In view of the number of the Circle's productions, in this article, we selected some of them which allowed us to address the concept object of this research in a more punctual way.

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<sup>1</sup> In the original: "um grupo, de uma intensa e afinada colaboração, em clima de amizade, em pesquisas comuns, a partir de interesses e competências diferentes" (PONZIO, 2011, p. 46).

<sup>2</sup> In the original: "sob a responsabilidade de um autor, não era a autoria que interessava ao grupo" (GERALDI, 2013, p. 13).

<sup>3</sup> In this text, we respect the authorship of the original editions. We recognize that Bakhtin was the author of the texts published under his name or found in his archives.

**Chart 1** – Chronology of the Circle’s texts.

| <b>Work/Text/Essay</b>  | <b>Published [Written]</b> |
|---|----------------------------|
| <i>Toward a philosophy of the act</i>                           | 1993 [1920-1924]           |
| <i>The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art</i> | 1990 [1923-1924]           |
| <i>Discourse in life and discourse in art</i>                   | 1976 [1926]                |
| <i>The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship</i>                | 1978 [1928]                |
| <i>Marxism and the philosophy of language</i>                   | 1973 [1929]                |
| <i>The Construction of the Utterance</i>                        | 1983a [1930]               |
| <i>The Word and its Social Function</i>                         | 1983b [1930]               |
| <i>Discourse in the Novel</i>                                   | 1981 [1934-1935]           |
| <i>Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel</i>         | 1981 [1937-1938]           |
| <i>Rabelais and His World</i>                                   | 1984 [1940]                |
| <i>The problem of speech genres</i>                             | 1986 [1951-1953]           |

**Source:** Authors’ elaboration.

The following sections cover each of the texts, presenting: (1) a brief summary of the analyzed text; (2) indications of the understandings on *theme* and (3) closing with the synthesis of the main impressions and references about the referred concept. After this overview, some reflections on the concept are woven observing similarities among the texts. Finally conclusion and references are presented.

### ***Toward a philosophy of the act***

*Toward a philosophy of the act* is an unfinished essay by Bakhtin, written between 1920-1924, in which the author interacts with the philosophical field of his time, through worldviews, life and culture, linked to the event of Being. The focus of the work is not the language itself, but the human condition which “does not do without language” (SOBRAL, 2019, p. 67, our translation).<sup>4</sup> Some concepts pointed out by Bakhtin, such as the unrepeatable, the unfinished, the acting/interacting, the emotive-volitional tone, the content-sense etc. have their echoes in later works, so it was triggered to start the discussion about the constitution of the *theme* conception.

The responsible act is called by Bakhtin (1993, p. 2), as *Janus two-faced*,<sup>5</sup> that is, the act constitutes the “objective unity of a domain of culture” and the “never-repeatable uniqueness of an actually lived and experienced life. Without these dimensions (the

<sup>4</sup> In the original: “*Não prescinde da linguagem*” (SOBRAL, 2019, p. 67).

<sup>5</sup> Janus is a deity with two faces: one that represents the future (facing forward) and another, what has passed (facing backwards). This analogy is evoked by the Circle, since nothing is definitive, everything is yet to come and it is the result of a dialogical link between discourses of the past, the present and the future, as it appears in *Forms of time and chronotope in the novel* (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p. 84), among others.

given and the new) there is no interaction, considering that if there is only the given, there is nothing new, there is no saying. If it is only the new, there is no understanding, as a common territory of understanding is needed. There is, therefore, a distinction between the real being and the act-event, focused on what is unrepeatable in the act, and its content-sense. The act forms an integral whole with its content-sense and with the presence of the real consciousness of the singular Being, determined by the concrete historicity of its realization.

Therefore, when Bakhtin (1993, p. 3) uses the expression “content-sense moment” of the act, he refers to “a thought as a universally valid judgment, an abstract sense aspect, a theoretical unity of the appropriate theoretical domain”. In the context of the act, thinking in its general sense, what is given is the aspect of the content, since, for the author, the content alone cannot force the subject to the act: “the content-aspect was also but a constituent moment [...]” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p. 39). The content, then, would be a moment of meaning, which joins the “given-to-accomplish”. This requires the act, the position and the evaluation of the acts, in order to make the subject responsible morally and ethically for what he does, referring to the “individual-historical aspect (the author, the time, the circumstances, and the moral unity of his life)” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p. 3). The content as a real value needs to be in an “essential link with effective valuation<sup>6</sup> [...] I can only think of it truly and actively in an emotive-volitional tone” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p. 33), demonstrating interconnection with the evaluative dimension.

In this process, there is the singular, situated subject, who responsibly performs his acts, establishing the dialogue between the moments of content and history, constituting the meaning. The act must find a bidirectional unity of responsibility in addition to a unitary plan

[...] to be able to reflect itself in both directions-in its sense or meaning and in its being; it must acquire the unity of two-sided answerability-both for its content (*special answerability*) and for its Being (*moral answerability*). And the special answerability, moreover, must be brought into communion with the unitary and unique moral answerability as a constituent moment in it (BAKHTIN, 1993, p. 2-3], emphasis added).

The existence of the Being is linked to moral responsibility, since the subject exists in a singular and unrepeatable way, occupying a unique, irreplaceable place on the part of the other. In this way, the existence is definable by the subject’s singular participation in the world, conceiving the unity of being as a unit of value. Special answerability is just a moment incorporated into the event. The act, being in the temporality of historicity,

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<sup>6</sup> In this text, during the presentation on theme, meaning, content, etc., other concepts of the Circle are triggered, such as value, dialogical relations, chronotope, understanding, among others. As the focus, here, is to observe the unfolding of the *theme*, throughout the works, the deepening about the specific relationships between *theme* and other concepts will be presented in other productions.

includes “slightly valuative flavor” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p. 11). Therefore, the statement exists not from the content (given), but in its realization. It is the emotional-volitional aspect (intonation) that gives life to the content-sense.

The concepts related to the question of the meaning of the act, in the spheres of content-sense and content permeated by the sense of action, are taken up in later works of the Circle. This is not about the explicit idea of a *theme*, but it is already pointed out: (1) the dialogue between the aspects of meaning-content (repeatable – linked to the theoretical unit) and the historical-individual (unrepeatable – historical-social scope) (2) the singularity of the act and the role of intonation for the meaning to be constituted, in dialogue with evaluative, temporal and spatial aspects.

### ***The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art***

*The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art*<sup>7</sup> was produced from 1923 to 1924. In the first part of this essay, *The Study of Art and General Aesthetics*, Bakhtin (1990) discusses the theoretical reductionism of the formalist and psychologist currents that proposes human relations according to facts, unrelated to concrete social practices. According to the author, “A fact and purely factual distinctiveness have no right to speak; to receive that right, they must become *meaning* [...]” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 260, emphasis added). The meaning, then, would correspond to the whole (union of fact, given data and singularity), since isolated, these elements constitute only meanings, which would be a contradiction in adjectum, according to the scholar.

In addressing the thought of material aesthetics, Bakhtin (1990, p. 262-263, emphasis added) highlights Jirmúnski’s thought about what he considers to be the “thematic constituent”: “theme is introduced by him merely as a *constituent of the material* (the meaning of words) [...]”. There is the formalists’ understanding of the concept of *theme*, which is strictly linked to textual materiality, to the meaning of the word, which is questioned by Bakhtin. The second part of the essay called *The Problem of Content* is presented after pointing out “a whole ‘series of errors’” of material aesthetics. The text highlights the need to build a set of knowledge that interacts with practical and social relationships, considering its formal aspects. The work, or aesthetic object, is alive and meaningful in a tense and active relationship with the valued reality.

The way in which the author deals with this “reality” seems to indicate clues in relation to what could be understood as a *theme*. He claims that: “[...] It must be also remembered once and for all that no reality *in itself*, no *neutral* reality, can be placed in opposition to art: by the very fact that we speak of it and oppose it to something, we determine it and evaluate it in some way [...]” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 276, emphasis

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<sup>7</sup> In Brazil, this essay was published in the work *Questões de literatura e de estética: a teoria do romance*, published in 1975, translated directly from Russian.

added)<sup>8</sup> e “The basic feature of the aesthetic that sharply distinguishes it from cognition and performed action is its receptive, positively accepting character, which enters into the work (or, to be exact, into the aesthetic object) and there becomes an indispensable constitutive moment. (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 278, emphasis added). The reality starts to be considered as something that is known and evaluated, constituting the work, so that:

The reality of cognition and ethical action that enters (as an already identified and evaluated reality) into the aesthetic object and is subjected there to concrete, intuitive unification, individuation, concretization, isolation, and consummation, i.e., to a process of comprehensive artistic forming by means of a particular material - this *reality we call* (in complete agreement with traditional word usage) *the content of a work of art* (or to be exact - *of the aesthetic object*). (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 281, emphasis added).

Thus, there is a broader sense, a “reality of cognition and ethical action” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 281), which, when receiving a “finish”, with the help of a material, it starts to be considered the content of the work. This content is “an indispensable constitutive moment in the aesthetic object” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 281), in direct relation to the aesthetic form, constituting meaning. Furthermore, the content is considered to be “object of cognition and ethical action” and without it “form cannot be aesthetically valid and cannot fulfill its basic functions” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 281).

Bakhtin (1990) deals with the work as a result of an architectural work by the author which brings together content, material and form. It is in the cultural and semantic-axiological context (scientific, artistic, political, etc.) or in the context of an isolated situation in everyday life that the utterance takes shape. This can occur in the areas of the materiality of the text – compositional form – and of the discourse, with a focus on the organization of the content, in the whole of the statement – architectural form.

Discourse, understood as a social phenomenon, constituted by “two powers and two legal orders; two axiological systems, that of content and that of form”,<sup>9</sup> because “in each valid constituent both systems are in a state of essential and axiologically intense interaction” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 284). As the chapter turns to content, the author points out three guiding principles: (a) the need to distinguish the ethical-cognitive element (the content) from the aesthetic; (b) the notion that the content turns to the ethical field, therefore, it should not be considered as a thought, an idea; and (c) the appropriation of the ethical-cognitive element of the content through co-appreciation, and not through theoretical understanding.

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<sup>8</sup> Italics are from the original text. Thus, we use underlining, in some quotes, to indicate our emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> In *O Problema do Autor* (*The Problem of the Author* – free translation) published within the Brazilian work *Estética da criação verbal* (BAKHTIN, 2003 [1979]), these discussions are resumed, since it is considered the work consists of two systems of axiological weight: content and form, together with the material aspect.

In the third part of the essay: *The Problem of Material*, Bakhtin (1990, p. 292). considers the utterance in a “value-and-meaning cultural context” This is because the whole meaning is considered “cultural” (cognitive, ethical and aesthetic), as well as “axiological”. When dealing with the material, Bakhtin resumes the content, stating:

[...] when attached to the word as one of its aspects (alongside the phoneme, the morpheme, and others), *content* appears to be more scientifically palpable, *more substantive materially* [...] content as an indispensable constitutive moment; we shall say only that scholars are usually inclined to understand under the thematic constituent (which is absent in some arts and present in others) only the constituent of object-related differentiation and cognitive determinateness, which is not peculiar to all the arts; *but this constituent in no way exhausts content* (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 54, emphasis added).

Here, it is a matter of fact that the content is inexhaustible, even though it has already been pointed out that it was subjected to a concrete unification, to a finish with the help of the material. At this point, the third part of the essay *The Problem of Form* is triggered. It is considered as an architectural form (organization of cognitive and ethical values) and in axiological relationship with the content. The biggest question that guides the discussion is: “how can form, as an expression through the word of a subjective active relationship to content, become a *creative* form that *consummates content?*” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 306, italics by the author).

The author resumes the discussion about the content, emphasizing that it is “quieted” and “concluded” by the form, which marks a pure and ethical-cognitive meaning, that is, a valuing reflection that approves or disapproves a practice, which either is or is not in line with it. The subject becomes active in form, occupying an axiological position outside the content, “this makes possible for the first time the consummation and, in general, the realization of all the aesthetic functions of form with regard to content” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 306).

The content of the work is considered the “segment” of an “event”, as follows: “The content of a work is, as it were, a *segment of the unitary open event of being* that has been isolated and freed by form from responsibility to the future event [...] (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 306-307, emphasis added). What, then, would this open and unique event be? Would it be possible to understand it in association with the aforementioned notion of “reality that enters the work”? The content is the reality of the act subjected to a concrete unification. According to a certain context, it is a fragment of the unique event liberated by the form. Therefore, it is not possible to affirm that content is synonymous with *theme*. This term is only used when some aspect of formalism is exemplified, considering it as a moment in the material.

In general, the reading of the essay allows raising interpretive aspects in relation to the act of signifying. Although the *theme* is not explicitly used, it may be seen as:

(1) the meaning constituted at the boundaries between content and form; (2) the reality which enters the work and becomes an indispensable element; (3) the significant moment in which content and form interact axiologically; (4) the unique and open event of existence.

### ***Discourse in life and discourse in art***

*Discourse in life and discourse in art* is an essay, from 1926, organized in seven parts. It deals with aspects of discourse in life, already mentioned, for example, in *Toward the philosophy of the act*, such as intonation, value judgment and extraverbal, constitutive of discourse, as well as the distinction between aesthetic verbal communication and everyday life, establishing the sociological method.

Vološinov (1976 [1926], p. 93) states that discourse is directly linked to life and cannot be divorced from it without losing its meaning. For this, there is the example of two people, in a room, one of whom says: “Well!”, and the other does not answer. In this case, looking from outside “Well!” is unintelligible if it is taken alone, but, for the subjects of the dialogue, “it does make *perfect sense*, it is *fully meaningful and complete*” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 99, emphasis added). Therefore, the ideas of “meaning” and “significance” are triggered, since for the author, no matter how much the verbal aspect is valued, “we shall still not come a single step closer to an understanding of the *whole sense of the colloquy*” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 99, emphasis added).

It is inferred, then, that the “meaning” becomes the total discourse, as a result of the links established with the extraverbal context. This is because the concrete utterance comprises “form” and “meaning” which “are determined basically by the form and character of this interaction” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 105) and when the statement of the “real soil that nourishes it” is extracted, “The key to both its form and its content” is lost. The meaning and importance of the discourse in life will not coincide with the purely verbal aspect, as there are the assumed ones not enunciated, since the subjects are in constant understanding and evaluation of the speeches.

It is the extraverbal context that makes the word “Well!” “a meaningful locution for the listener” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 99). In other words, a statement full of significant content, within a broader semantic context, which presupposes, for example, that we know the intonation with which it was pronounced. Given this, there is the statement, the result of the link between the meaning of content and form, within an extraverbal context, making it full of meaning.

Therefore, in order to understand the “whole sense”, it is necessary to consider the extraverbal which consists of: “a) the *common spatial purview* of the interlocutors [where and when it is spoken]; b) the interlocutors’ *common knowledge and understanding of the situation* [object; what is spoken]; (3) their *common evaluation* of that situation [the subjects’ evaluative attitude] (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 93, emphasis added).

In the concrete utterance, there is, therefore, the perceived and the assumed, with characteristics that will allow discussing the role of the constitution of meaning in the utterance. When it comes to what is perceived, it refers to “the strictly verbal (linguistic) factors of the utterance” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 98), that is, the technical aspect of form. The assumed, on the other hand, turns to the extraverbal, linked to “content, as its ideological evaluation [...]” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 108).

Just as the “whole sense” of an utterance is addressed, other passages seem to reflect the more global question of the meaning of the utterance, which leads us to think about the concept of theme. For example, in “A viable understanding of the *whole import of discourse* must reproduce this event of the mutual relationship between speakers [...]” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 106, emphasis added) and “the *total import of discourse* and its ideological value – the cognitive, political, aesthetic, or other – are inaccessible [from the linguistic point of view]” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 106, emphasis added), there seems to be an amplitude in the understanding of the discourse. Adjectives are triggered, such as “whole” and “total”, which lead to the comprehension of the content in its entirety, and not only as an object that is spoken.

There is a more situated perception of the object of the statement, when the author approaches that the speech is the product of the interaction of three participants: “the speaker (author), the listener (reader), and *the topic (the who or what) of speech (the hero)*” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 105, emphasis added). In the text, a synonym for the highlighted expression: “the object of the utterance as the third, living participant” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 104); *the topic (the who or what) of speech* (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 105); “the object of the utterance – the hero” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 107). In general, the “hero” is the topic of speech, its content, and it is seen as an active expression of the evaluation, just as the listener, is too.<sup>10</sup>

The utterance, as already exposed, comprises the content/the hero, as well as the form that is signified by the content. The form, as materiality of the sign, needs to be a “*convincing evaluation* of the content” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 108, emphasis added), that is, there is an “evaluative rank” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 110), there is a weight hierarchy of the “hero”, which will determine the general level of the form and its configuring elements. That is because “the hero who serves as the organizing center of the utterance” (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926], p. 111).

In general, from reading *Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art*, in relation to the act of signifying, it appears that: (1) the use of expressions such as “whole meaning” of an utterance, “global meaning” and “whole content” of the discourse allows thinking of the broader concept of meaning, tending towards the *theme*; (2) in enunciation, relationships between meanings and significances are established, along with the extraverbal context; (3) the content and importance of speech in life will not coincide with the purely verbal aspect; (4) the hero is considered the “content of the utterance”;

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<sup>10</sup> In the 1930 essay, entitled, *The construction of the utterance*, Vološinov (1983a [1930]) reaffirms the understanding of “the object or *theme* that the utterance is about”, that is, of what is being talked about.

“The object of the utterance”; the “third living participant” in the interaction; “The topic of speech”; “The organizing center of the utterance”.

### ***The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship***

*The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, produced in 1928, is configured as a fundamental reading for understanding the elements of Russian Formalism, a trend studied until the end of the 1980s. The formalists considered poetic language as the initial object of their theory, to the detriment of the work. They focused on the opposition to subjectivism, disregarding the external context in their discussions. Bakhtin/Medvedev (1978 [1928], p.11), in turn, considers the “work” as an “ideological product”.

In reading the book, two chapters allow for more fruitful reflections on the act of signifying, namely: *Material and Device as Components of the Poetic Construction* and *The Elements of the Artistic Construction*. In the first, Bakhtin/Medvedev (1978 [1928], p. 120, emphasis added) states that “not only the *meaning of the utterance* is of *historical and social significance*, but also the very fact of its performance of the here and the now, in given circumstances, in a certain historical moment, under the conditions of given social situation” in order to consider the statement loaded with a broader sense, that is, as a reflection of the historical and social meanings.

The author continues to deal with the evaluation of the utterance that “It is this historical actuality, which unites the individual presence of the utterance with the generality and fullness of its meaning [...]” (BAKHTIN; MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p. 121), that is, this singular presence, can refer here to the content, which receives relative finishing, under specific conditions, as seen in *The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art* (BAKHTIN, 1990). In addition, there is a full sense of the utterance, something broad, not delimited, that could be considered within the scope of the *theme*, as well as exposed in *Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art*.

The “forms of utterance” are presented in the chapter: *The Elements of the Artistic Construction*, basing the discussion on the idea that language materializes through utterances and their genres. When dealing with the elements of artistic construction, art is conceived as the way in which subjects signify reality, through semiotic materiality, which contributes to reflections on genres. For Bakhtin/Medvedev (1978 [1928]), the formalists did not understand the social role of the genres, given that their concern turned to poetic language, specifically. In this sense, it is observed that the reality of gender is considered as the social reality, marked by time and space, and it is defined, by Bakhtin/Medvedev (1978 [1928], p. 135), as “the means of collective orientation in reality, with the orientation towards finalization [...]”, which is always relative.

For the authors, there are the two-fold orientation of genre in reality, with indissoluble interdependence, which makes it possible to treat the socially situated subject. In the first orientation, the exteriority of the genre related to life, for its events, is considered, in terms of time, space and the ideological sphere to which the genre is aligned. In the second orientation, the focus is on the interiority of the genre, for aspects of its form and

content. A first aspect to be highlighted refers to the utterance that “[...] compositional finalization is possible in all spheres of ideological creation, but *real thematic finalization is impossible*” (BAKHTIN; MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p. 130, emphasis added). Here, a characteristic related to the *theme*, the idea that it cannot be closed or receive a finish, has already been identified, perhaps due to its scope and ampleness.

Furthermore, there is the idea that “the work is oriented in life, from within, one might say, by its *thematic content*. Every genre has its own orientation in life, with reference to its events, problems, etc.” (BAKHTIN; MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p. 131, emphasis added). It deals with the thematic content of the utterance, in a more restricted / situated way, at the same time that it is said that the genre is oriented towards life thematically, featuring something broader, focused on events. The *theme* seems to be the most unstable basis for the constitution of the statement that is associated with a meaning, expressed in the content. Thus, it is within the *theme* that signification has the possibility to signify.

In addition to the use of “thematic content”, Bakhtin/Medvedev (1978 [1928], p. 131, emphasis added) starts to question: “What is the *thematic unity* of the work?”. It is possible to understand the answer and observe the use of different terms, as postulated by the author:

The *thematic unity* of the work is not the combination of the *meanings* of its words and individual sentences [...] The linguistic conception of the *meaning* of the word and sentence is satisfactory for the word and sentence as such, but not for the theme. The *theme* is not composed of these meanings; it is formed with their help, but they only help to the same extent as all the other semantic elements of language. *Language helps us master the theme, but we should not make theme an element of language.* (BAKHTIN; MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p. 132, emphasis added).

For the authors, “thematic unity” is not a combination of meanings of isolated words. In addition, the “linguistic conception of the meaning of the word” belongs to the word taken in isolation, and not to the “theme” that is not formed from these meanings. There seems to be the same understanding of “word meanings” and their “significances”. Based on that, the “theme” is constituted with the help of linguistic understanding and the semantic elements of the language, in order to transcend “the language, [due to directing it to] the whole of the utterance as a discursive presentation [...] The *theme* of the work is the *theme of the whole utterance* [constitutive social dimension] as a definite *sociohistorical act*” (BAKHTIN; MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p. 132, emphasis added). Thus, the theme is being realized in the social reality.

In view of the above, “thematic unity” and “theme” seem to be related concepts. This is maintained when the other definitions for the terms are observed, since the theme is inseparable from the situation of the statement and the linguistic elements. For the authors,

The aggregate of *the meanings of the work's literary elements is only one of the means of controlling the theme and is not the theme itself*. [...] This method of study is only good for the meanings of words and sentences, [...] The theme itself, theme being understood as the theme of the whole utterance, cannot be studied this way. (BAKHTIN; MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p. 132, emphasis added).

For Bakhtin/Medvedev (1978 [1928]), the *theme* is inseparable from the social situation. When dealing with the thematic unit, he considers Tomachévski's definition erroneous, that "Theme (what is talked about) is the unity of the meanings of the separate elements of the work" (BAKHTIN; MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p. 136). In reality, the formalist highlights the subject (of which one speaks) of the work, since he considers the linguistic aspects as means to reach the *theme*.

At the same time that the author used a *theme*, he goes on to say that "*the thematic unity of the work* is inseparable from its primary orientation in its environment, inseparable, that is to say, from the circumstances of place and time [...] The *thematic unity* of the work and its real place in life organically grow together in the unity of the genre" (BAKHTIN; MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p. 132-133). Besides that, the

[...] *content will correspond to thematic unity*,<sup>11</sup> and form to the actual realization of the work. [...] There is no formless content and there is no contentless form. Social evaluation is the common denominator of the content and form of every element of the construction. (BAKHTIN; MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p. 140, emphasis added).

In the text, there is an approximation in the understanding of "thematic unity" and "theme". When dealing with the problem of content, Bakhtin (1990), considered it as a reality submitted to a finish with the help of the material. Therefore, if it is impossible to give a thematic finish to the utterance, as explained by Bakhtin/Medvedev (1978 [1928]), the content does not correspond to the notion of theme/thematic unity.

In this work, Medvedev uses the term "theme", and it is possible to deduce some considerations about it (1) it is not directed towards the word and the phrase isolated from the social situation; (2) it is constituted with the help of language and transcends it; (3) it is the *theme* of the whole of the utterance; (4) it is inseparable both from the whole of the utterance situation and from the linguistic elements; (5) it is inseparable from spatial and temporal circumstances; (6) it will correspond to the thematic unity; (7) it cannot be concluded in the utterance.

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<sup>11</sup> In the Brazilian edition of the work, it is stated that the "content will correspond to the thematic unity (at its limit)" (MEDVIÉDEV, 2019 [1928], p. 206, emphasis added), which allows for more meaning: the content corresponding to the thematic unity "at its limit", that is, the content is related to the thematic unit / theme, at its limit, as if it were possible to finish with what is said.

## *Marxism and the philosophy of language*

*Marxism and the philosophy of language* is one of the Circle's most recognized works in the field of linguistic studies, produced in 1929. In it, Vološinov deals with the interactionist conception of language, through questions regarding the assumptions of structural linguistics and classical stylistics, proposing a sociological method for the sciences of language, already started in *Discourse in life and discourse in art*.

Some scholars (BOENAVIDES, 2015; DIAS, 2005; SOBRAL, 2009; CEREJA, 2005) have already focused on the discussion on the theme, in *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, mainly, focusing on the chapter *Theme and meaning in language*, in which a counterpoint is established between two concepts. Although Vološinov (1973 [1929]) intended to discuss the topic in Chapter 4, it is important to highlight its occurrence throughout the work.<sup>12</sup> In reading the chapters, it is possible to understand the link between the concept of *theme* and others, such as infrastructure and superstructures; form and content; of valuation and significance.

Chapter 2 addresses “the problem of the interrelationship of the basis and superstructures [considered] a problem of exceptional complexity, requiring enormous amounts of preliminary data for its productive treatment - can be elucidated to a significant degree through the material of the word” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 18-19). The *theme* will be precisely at the end of the process initiated in the infrastructure, that is, in reality, in dialogue with the formalized superstructures/ideological sphere. It seeks to know, then, “how current existence (the basis) determines sign, and how sign reflects and refracts existence in its process of generation” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 19), indicating that the enunciation process is determined by both the utterance and the social audience (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929]).

From this, Vološinov (1973 [1929]) approaches social psychology, according to some main characteristics. The first deals with the link “between the sociopolitical order and ideology in the narrow sense (science, art, and the like) [...]” which materializes in the form of verbal interaction (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p.19). In this way, this social psychology is entirely externalized in the word, starting from: “[1] the viewpoint of content, i.e., the themes pertinent to it at this or that moment”, that is, from the object of the discourse and the social situation that is updated in time, constituting a complete sense of the enunciation; and “[and 2] the viewpoint of the *forms and types of verbal communication* in which the *themes in questions are implemented* (i.e., discussed, expressed, questioned, pondered over, etc.)”, that is, from the discursive genres (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 20, emphasis added). Depending on the time

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<sup>12</sup> Boenavides (2015) recorded 93 occurrences of the term, in *Marxism and the philosophy of language*. This text did not verify, in numbers, the occurrences of the term *theme* (or some correlate), but shares the idea that six Chapters mention it, respectively: *Concerning the Relation of the Basis and Superstructures*; *Two Trends of Thought in Philosophy of Language*; *Theme and meaning in language*; *Exposition of the Problem of Reported Speech*; *Indirect Discourse, Direct Discourse, and Their Modifications*; *Quase-Direct Discourse in French, German and Russian*. Furthermore, this text considers that, in the Chapter, *Language, speech and enunciation*, although there is no mention of the term, it is possible to deal with the *theme*, when addressing the mobility of the sign.

and the social group, there is a specific repertoire of genres, of discursive forms, which present their “speech forms” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 20), because, according to the author, already in reference to the chapter *Theme and meaning in language*, the words/discursive forms have a plurality of meanings that are changed with the change of situation. Over time, even though the *theme* dissolves the meaning, the significances begin to undergo a certain solidification for the thematic use of the different words, being able to form what was called a group of themes. In this way, the word always operates as a complete utterance, without stable meanings. For this reason, later in the discussions, the author will state that it is not possible to draw a strict limit between the theme and the meaning.

Still in chapter 2, the author deals with the relationship between the concept of theme and form; the themes express meaning which materialize in form. If the sign comes from interaction, it becomes essential that the object [the content] “acquire interindividual significance” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 22, emphasis added), in order to form the sign, charged with social value.

In the chapter, *Theme and meaning in language*, more punctually, the author deals with the relationship between theme and meaning, pointing out clearer definitions of what a theme is. However, in chapter 2, the author already anticipates a notion: “Let us agree to call the entity which becomes the object of a sign the *theme* of the sign. Each fully fledged sign has its *theme*. And so, every verbal performance has its *theme*” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 22, emphasis added). In general, the *theme* is conceived as the entity/reality<sup>13</sup> which participates in the constitution of the utterance. In the essay on the content problem, Bakhtin (1990, p.35) already seemed to point to this understanding, since there he refers to the “reality of knowledge and the aesthetic act” which, when it receives a “finishing”, with the help of a material, the content of the work is considered.

These assumptions seem to be reaffirmed in the chapter on the topic: “[the *theme* of the utterance] is the expression of the concrete, historical situation that engendered the utterance” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 99). The concrete historical situation / reality and its expression are understood as the great social theme, objectively inexhaustible. In addition, the author complements, in a footnote: “The term is, of course, a provisional one. *Theme* in our sense embraces its implementation as well; therefore, our concept must not be confused with that of a theme in a literary work” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 99, emphasis added), since, in the latter case, it is understood within the limits of the literary text. Finally, the author states: “The concept of ‘thematic unity’ would be closer to what we mean” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 99). In this case, Vološinov understands *theme* as the reality that covers its realization and brings it closer to the notion of thematic unity. This occurs, therefore, in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, Bakhtin/Medvedev (1978 [1928]) proposes that the thematic unity of the work is inseparable from the spatial and temporal circumstances, considering its social

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<sup>13</sup> This sense of *theme* turned to reality is also developed in the 1930 essay, *The word and its social function*.

realization. Therefore, *theme* and thematic unity are close terms, in the sense that they are inseparable from their orientation towards reality.

In addition, considering the theme as an expression of the “concrete historical situation”, the author states, right at the beginning of the chapter: “A definite and unitary meaning, a unitary significance, is a property belonging to any utterance *as a whole*. Let us call the significance of a whole utterance its *theme*” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 99, emphasis added). The utterance which is pregnant with meaning is made up of the link between: (1) the expression of a historical and concrete situation; the “definite and unitary meaning”; the “theme”, that is, the meaning assumed at each performance (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929]); and (2) the “significance”; the abstract expression; the linguistic meaning, that is, the semiotic meaning of the data (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929]).

The *theme* is endowed with meaning and needs the form of the utterance to materialize. When this occurs, meaning becomes the *theme* of a given discourse and becomes semantically constituted by the forms that materialized it. Thus, the *theme* is considered individual, reiterable, flexible and dynamic, given the conditions of production of the statement in a space-time. Furthermore, it is determined by the linguistic forms and the non-verbal elements of the situation, in reference to the aspects already dealt with in the previous texts: something-yet-to-be-determined/unrepeatable reality (BAKHTIN, 1993); the assumed (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926]); the content/sense (BAKHTIN, 1993); and the perceived (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926]).

That’s why it is said that “a theme must base itself on some kind of fixity of meaning; otherwise it loses its connection with what came before and what comes after – i.e., it altogether loses its significance” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 100). The fixity of meaning refers to a semiotic system with the power to signify, within the concrete *theme*. The meaning is understood as “those aspects of the utterance that are *reproducible* and *self-identical* in all instances of repetition (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 100, italics by the author). It is the technical apparatus for the realization of the *theme*, a semiotic system which signifies. Thus, “Theme is the *upper, actual limit of linguistic significance; in essence, only theme means something definite*” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 101, italics by the author). Therefore, the study of the meaning of a linguistic element can occur at the limit of the theme (upper), when it comes to the contextual meaning of the word, as a concrete utterance, and/or at the limit of meaning (lower), with the study of the word in the system, but with the power to mean within the scope of the theme.

The theme, with its content which can be updated with each utterance, is also constituted by the form that carries it and expresses the value index that is, by its nature, inter-individual. Therefore, the question arises: is it possible to understand the meaning only from the notion that it refers to the non-reiterable elements of the language? In the Chapter, *Language, Speech, and Utterance*, Vološinov (1973 [1929]) deals with the concept of “specific viability”, which can help in understanding the relationship between theme and meaning:

Should a linguistic form remain only a signal, recognized as such by the understander, it, then, does not exist for him as a linguistic form. [...] Thus the constituent factor for the linguistic form, as for the sign, is not at all its self-identity as signal but its specific variability; and the constituent factor for understanding the linguistic form is not recognition of “the same thing”, but understanding in the proper sense of the word, i.e., orientation in the particular, given context and in the particular, given situation – orientation in the dynamic process of becoming and not “orientation” in some inert state. (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 69, italics by the author).

The author understands specific viability as “orientation in the particular, given context and in the particular, given situation”, a characteristic focused on the *theme*, a concrete/situated situation, using, for this, the technical apparatus, the meaning. This presents orientation to some inertia when detached from the situation; however, when giving form to the *theme*, the word originates which is understood in a particular sense.

The active understanding makes it possible to access the theme, because “to understand another person’s utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 100). For this reason, it is not possible to draw an evident boundary between the theme and the meaning. This belongs to the word as an element of link between interlocutors; when the subject seeks the meaning of the word, disregarding the theme of the sign (the reality that gives rise to its formation), it reaches its lower level, stable and identical to itself, cutting off the chain of communication, responsible for providing meaning to life.

The enunciation consists of a dialogue between the stability of meaning, which allows its recognition in different contexts, and relative variability, depending on the thematic reality of social tensions. Along with the theme and the meaning of a content, there is also an accent of value or appreciation. We only understand the historical evolution of the theme and the meanings which compose it, due to the appreciative horizon of a particular social group.<sup>14</sup> That is why meaning, an abstract element in itself, is absorbed by the *theme*, by the unstable portion of the act of signifying, “[...] so as to return in the shape of a new meaning with affixity and self-identity only for the while, just as it had before” (VOLOŠINOV, 1973 [1929], p. 106).

In later discussions, Bakhtin revisits aspects exposed in *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, for example, when he says that the senses are always renewable and that they will revive in each new context (in 1930-1940, in *Toward a Methodology for the*

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<sup>14</sup> In the essay *Some guiding thoughts for the work ‘Marxism and philosophy of language’*, Voloshinov (2004 [1930]) considers evaluation as the most active and socially significant aspect that emerges in utterance. To establish meaning, an axiological social horizon is needed, which will allow the social group to change the meanings of words, in language.

*Human Sciences*); as well as the idea that, in the confrontation of the senses, dialogical relations and social values determined by the social group are revealed (in 1959-61, in *The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis*).

From the above, it is possible to deduce some considerations regarding the *theme*: (1) it is related to social psychology; (2) it is the reality that gives rise to the formation of a sign, called the theme of the sign; (3) it is the reality that participates in the constitution of the utterance; (4) it is the expression of a concrete historical situation of interaction; (5) it should not be confused with the theme of a work of art; (6) it approaches the concept of “thematic unity”; (7) it is a definite and unique sense; (8) it is endowed with meaning and needs the form of the utterance to materialize; (9) it is individual, repeatable, flexible and dynamic; (10) it is based on a certain stability of meaning; (11) it constitutes the real upper stage of the linguistic capacity to signify; (12) it is linked to relative viability; (13) it acts together with the meaning and the accent of value or appreciation.

### ***The Construction of the Utterance***

In 1930, the essay *The Construction of the Utterance* was produced, reaffirming the social nature of language like the other works of the Circle. Vološinov (1983a [1930], p. 123, italics by the author) argues that each utterance presents, in addition to social orientation, “a certain sense or content. If it lacks this content, the utterance turns into an array of meaningless sounds and loses its character as speech interaction”. To achieve the meaning of the enunciation, through the content and form of the discourse, it is necessary to know the conditions under which it was pronounced. From this, the author announces that

Almost any word in our language may have *several meanings* depending on the *general sense* of the whole utterance. And this general sense is completely dependent both on the most immediate environment which is directly responsible for generating it, and also on the most remote social causes and factors underlying that particular speech communication (VOLOŠINOV, 1983a [1930], p. 124, emphasis added).

In order to achieve the “general sense” of the utterance, it is necessary to consider the immediate situation, as well as the causes and conditions of the moment of the interaction. In *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, there is the use of a “general sense of utterance”, when dealing with the *theme*, given that the meaning of the complete utterance is determined by the linguistic forms and the non-verbal elements of the situation.

In view of this, Vološinov (1983a [1930]) considers that each utterance consists of two parts: verbal and non-verbal, and uses an example to illustrate: a man with a

gray beard, sitting at a table, saying “‘h’m’”. A young man who was standing, blushed and left. What can the verbal part of the utterance mean: “‘h’m’”? Why do we not understand the situation?

It is because we do not know the second, non-verbal component of the utterance, which determines the meaning of the first, verbal, component. Firstly, we do not know *when and where* the event of this conversation occurred; secondly, we do not know the *topic*, and, finally, thirdly, we do not know the speakers' *attitude* to this *topic*, their mutual *evaluation* of it (VOLOŠINOV, 1983a [1930], p. 125, italics by the author).

The topic of conversation is one of the three underlying aspects of the non-verbal part: [1] time and place of the event of the utterance (the “where” and “when”); [2] the topic or theme of the utterance (“what” is being spoken about) and [3] the speakers' *attitude* to what is happening (the “evaluation”) (VOLOŠINOV, 1983a [1930], p. 125, emphasis added). In this case, the author considers “the topic or theme of the utterance”, as synonyms, that is, as being “what” is being spoken about”, in very close dialogue with the definition of “*topic/ hero/ the object of the utterance*”, found in *Discourse in life and discourse in art*. Vološinov (1983a [1930]) states that the situation and the audience determine the social orientation of the utterance, as well as the very topic of the conversation, that is, what is being talked about.

Based on the above, in the text, a theme is used such as: (1) the object or theme that the utterance is about; (2) “that which” is spoken of.

## The Word and its Social Function

Vološinov (1983b [1930]) begins his text with a discussion about the transformation of the object into an ideological sign, as he did in *Marxism and the philosophy of language*. To make an object enter the social horizon of a group and enable semantic and ideological reactions, it must be linked to the socioeconomic premises of the group objective reality.

There is, then, the word as a sign, with a significant sound, pronounced or thought at a certain real historical moment, in the communicative exchange. It is not only a point of view, but an “evaluating point of view”, because, when using the word, the subject perceives the “*reality [...] which is reflected by the word, of which the word is its sign*” (VOLOŠINOV, 1983b [1930], p. 45, emphasis added). Moreover, “[...] *one and the same word*, on the lips of people of different classes will reflect different views, will express different points of view, will reveal different relations to one and the same reality, *to one and the same chunk of being which is the theme of the given word*” (VOLOŠINOV, 1983b [1930], p. 145, emphasis added). Here, the theme of the

word is considered as the “reality” or the “fragment of reality”, in a more discursive sense of the term, which is beyond the linguistic limits of the utterance.

It is in this sense that the text highlights that we do not evaluate the word as a sound “which is linked to some meanings, not the word as an object of grammatical study, but the *sense*, the *content*, the *theme* [...]” (VOLOŠINOV, 1983b [1930], p. 145, italics by the author). The word is loaded with (1) objective/object meaning (depending on the social situation); (2) content, understood as part of a larger reality, as a fragment of the event; (3) theme, understood as “*Historical and natural reality becomes the theme of our words while ideological signs*” (VOLOŠINOV, 1983b [1930], p. 148, emphasis added). Therefore, objective reality becomes the theme of utterance, unlike content, a fragment of the larger event.

From the above, it is possible to deduce some considerations on the subject: (1) reality which becomes a *theme*; (2) do not confuse it with content.

### ***Discourse in the Novel***

*Discourse in the Novel* was produced between the years 1934-1935. In the introductory part, Bakhtin (1981b) states that the objective of the work is to eliminate the rupture between abstract formalism and ideologism in literary studies. This is because he begins to understand discourse as a social phenomenon. During the essay, Bakhtin defends the novel as a “phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” (BAKHTIN, 1981b, p. 261) and “diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (BAKHTIN, 1981b, p. 262). The novel is considered in the light of the different social voices that compose it, in order to orchestrate all its themes, that is, all its contents.

Regarding the theme of the novel genre, Bakhtin (1981b, p. 332) states that the “[...] the decisive and distinctive importance of the novel as a genre: the human being in the novel is first, foremost and always a speaking human being”, further indicating: “the speaking person and his discourse” and the subject who speaks and his word in the extra-literary sphere of life (BAKHTIN, 1981b, p. 333). This reveals the clear dialogue with the work *Problems of the work of Dostoevsky*, from 1929, later renamed as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, from 1963, which records the great interest of scholars in literature. In it, the fundamental *theme* of all works of the novel genre (such as Dostoevsky's) is “the orientation of one person to another person's discourse and consciousness” (BAKHTIN, 1984a [1963]), for the hero's discourse about himself is constituted by the influence of the other's discourse about him.

The *theme* of the romance genre can be considered the speech/discourse of the common man, within the scope of the literary sphere. This object/theme of the genre is penetrated by different ideas, intonations; it guides the discourse which is connected with others already said, generating understandings of the current meaning of the discourse, from other utterances of the same theme.

From the above, it is possible to deduce some considerations regarding the theme: (1) it deals with the theme of the romance genre, defined as the man who speaks and his word or the person who speaks and his speech.

### ***Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel***

The essay *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* was originally written between 1937-1938. The main focus of the text is on the discussion of the chronotope, that is, on the indissoluble relations between time and space, assimilated in literature, given that space can be fixed, but it is within it that time is perceived. Bakhtin (1981a) considers the chronotope as a fundamental element for the study of genres, as it organizes events in space and time.

When dealing with the Greek novel, the author deals with different “themes” as constitutive elements in the plots, for example, the encounter, the farewell etc. which are “chronotopic” (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p. 97). Therefore, although the “motifs of romances” (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p. 102) are not new, as they had already been developed by other genres, within the scope of this chronotope, they acquire new meaning, in particular functions. The *theme* is a concept used by the author, in the sense of content/object of the novel that ends up being determined by a singular orientation towards a reality, according to the social group worldview: “Insofar as stratification of the communal whole into social classes occurs, the complex undergoes fundamental changes, the motifs and narratives that correspond to those strata are subject to a reinterpretation” (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p. 211).

Reading the text makes it possible to understand that the meaning of chronotopes carries their thematic meaning, as they organize the thematic events of the novel: “any motif may have a special chronotope of its own” (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p. 252). We can trigger, here, the notions of content pointed out, for example, in *Problem of Content*, when Bakhtin (1990) affirms that the content/object, in a determined space and time, is submitted to a concrete unification, to a relative finish, within a given social situation. As well as the hero/topic (VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1926]), understood as the object of the statement.

From the above, it is possible to deduce some considerations regarding the *theme*: (1) it interacts with the concept of chronotope; (2) it is understood as content / object of the novel; (3) it receives a singular orientation towards a reality, according to the social group’s worldview.

### ***Rabelais and his World***

*Rabelais and his World*, produced in 1940, is a reference work in literary studies, mainly for those who dedicate themselves to the history of laughter and popular culture. In the *Introduction*, Bakhtin presents the central objective: to understand the influence

of popular comic culture in the work of François Rabelais. In the book, the concept of sign as an arena of struggle, a place where social values intersect, present, for example, in *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, it is clearly illustrated, since the differences in meanings of the same word in different contexts are addressed. Mainly, in *Rabelais' Images and His Time*, Bakhtin highlights how Rabelais approaches customs of his time in other words.

In chapter 1, *Rabelais in the History of Laughter*, Bakhtin analyzes Rabelais' work and its relations with popular culture. In chapter two, Bakhtin discusses the presence of the elements of grotesque realism, inherent in the narrative. The imagetic whole of realism is analyzed in the third chapter; images of childbirth, the act of eating stand out. Bakhtin (1984b [1940], p. 445) reveals how Rabelais, through his images, seeks to highlight “his connection with the world he had lived in and the people he closely knew”, through the plans of contemporary reality, the political problems of his time, added to the “popular carnivalesque plan of the war” (BAKHTIN, 1984b [1940], p. 445).

Therefore, there are larger plans that cover the images/words of Rabelais, since his entire work “is most closely linked to the events and political problems of his time” (BAKHTIN, 1984b [1940], p. 393). For example, the images of the picrocholine war are “a living echo of this current political theme of the aggressor” (BAKHTIN, 1984b [1940], p. 447). Furthermore, in the images of the parties, in the carnivalesque plan, “the deepest meaning of the historic process” is revealed (BAKHTIN, 1984b [1940], p. 447-448). Bakhtin presents the word/image of the elements, in Rabelais' text, interacting directly with time, with his social reality. This space-time orientation that determines the elaboration of discourse / genre, resumes the studied concepts of chronotope, in *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* (BAKHTIN, 1981a).

Bakhtin deals with some pieces, like *Le jeu de la feuillée*, by Arras, and indicates, for example, the “banquet theme” and “the dice game theme” (BAKHTIN, 1984b [1940], p. 259) which, according to the chronotope, will receive different meanings, because “every object, every concept, every point of view, as well as every intonation found their place at this intersection of linguistic philosophies and was drawn into an intense ideological struggle” (BAKHTIN, 1984b [1940], p. 471).

From the above, it is possible to deduce some considerations regarding the theme: (1) it is understood as content/object of the novel; (2) it receives a singular orientation towards a reality, according to the social group worldview.

### ***The Problem of Speech Genres***

*The Problem of Speech Genres* was written between 1951 and 1953, in Saransk, and it was published in Russia for the first time in a collection in 1979. In this unfinished essay, Bakhtin (1986) presents the utterance as a concrete entity and language as a socio-historical instrument, constituted and structured by the forms of organization

and distribution of social spheres, such as the spheres of everyday life (family and intimate) and the spheres of the constituted ideological systems (morals, religion, science, art, etc.) Inside, the utterances reflect their conditions and purposes, not only in their (thematic) content, but also in their style and compositional construction. For the author, “Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances. These we may call speech genres” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 60). Therefore, the sphere in which the genre is inserted is the starting point for its study.

The conception that genres are relatively stable types is based on the historical perspective of language and not on theoretical-abstract. This is because genres are types of stylistic, thematic and compositional utterances, historically constituted, with common structural peculiarities, within social situations of use of language. In addition, the genres are “the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 65), constituting “thematic content”, “style” and by the “compositional structure” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 60).

According to Bakhtin, discourse objects are present in social spheres and are inexhaustible. Because it is within the limits of the utterance, this object, already considered a theme/content, loaded with meaning, can be exhausted, that is, “exhausted” (HOUAISS, 2004, p. 332),<sup>15</sup> which allows us to speak of the “semantic exhaustiveness of the theme” or “referential and semantic exhaustiveness of the theme of the utterance” (HOUAISS, 2004, p. 281), one of the factors that it provides to address the finished totality of the statement. Here, it is possible to resume *The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art* (BAKHTIN, 1990), when Bakhtin affirms that the content of the object is submitted to a finish, becoming content with an ethical-cognitive sense.

This theme of the utterance/thematic content gains finishing due to conditions defined by the author. The speaker’s speech plan determines the choice of the object, as well as the exhaustive treatment of the object’s meaning. The subjective aspect (speech plan) combines with the objective referentially semantic aspect, restricting it, linking it to a specific concrete situation of communication, making it the content of a given utterance.

For Bakhtin (1986, p. 87), “When we select words in the process of constructing an utterance, we by no means always take them from the system of language in their neutral, dictionary form. We usually take them from other utterances, and mainly from utterances that are kindred to ours in genre, that is, in theme, composition, or style”. Therefore, because they belong to the same sphere and to the same genre, there are certain regularities of the genre, not as a rule, which Bakhtin says: “The generic normative quality is freer” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 87) and he complements:

A speech genre is not a form of language, but a typical form of utterance;  
as such the genre also includes a certain typical kind of expression that

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<sup>15</sup> In the original: “*esgotado*” (HOUAISS, 2004, p. 332).

inheres in it. In the genre the word acquires a *particular typical expression*. Genres correspond to *typical situations of speech communication, typical themes, and, consequently, also to particular contacts between the meanings of words and actual concrete reality under certain typical circumstances* (BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 87, emphasis added).

Genres can be considered from the perspective of the social typification of utterances, with certain common regularities, historically constituted in human activities. So, these genres will correspond to “typical themes”, which can be understood, through the quote, as: “typical situations of speech communication” and “reality under certain typical circumstances”, that is, genre, within a given sphere and social situation, presents a typical theme to be addressed. This typification is marked linguistically and compositionally in the genre, due to linguistic variability. When this typical content/theme becomes finalized, due to conditions defined by the author, Bakhtin highlights the “theme of the utterance”.

For example, in the case of the article-journalistic genre, the writer’s point of view on social and political events in the historical-social context is typical content, objects of journalistic news (RODRIGUES, 2005). When the analysis of a specimen specific to the genre is carried out, as performed by Rodrigues (2005), with the example text, *The pension and life expectancy*<sup>16</sup> by Antonio Ermírio de Moraes, “the thematic content of the utterance” or the “theme of the utterance” is addressed, since the writer belongs to the business category, which “takes social security reform as the object of his discourse, a topic under debate at that historical moment and focused on by the media, and ‘expresses’ its value as ‘the truth’ when positioning itself in favor of reform” (RODRIGUES, 2005, p. 173, our translation).<sup>17</sup> The article is motivated by current events, such as pension reform, so that the article produced constitutes a reaction-response to other current discourses (the aforementioned), establishing dialogical relationships, and seeking an active reaction-response to your interlocutor. In this way, the content of the statement takes on a particular meaning, becoming relatively complete, depending on the conditions of production and the established value relations. It is in this context that we are dealing with the relative conclusion or relative exhaustion of the object and of the sense, the finishing element of the statement.

From the above, it is possible to deduce some considerations regarding the theme: (1) it is focused on the object of the utterance; (2) it gains conclusibility due to conditions defined by the author; (3) understood as the theme of the utterance / thematic content of the utterance and the typical theme / thematic content typical of the genre.

This perception of theme, in general, does not align with the proposal in *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, since, in this work, the enunciation constitutes the

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<sup>16</sup> In the original: “*A previdência e a expectativa de vida*”.

<sup>17</sup> In the original: “*toma a reforma previdenciária como objeto do seu discurso, tema em debate naquele momento histórico e focalizada pela mídia, e ‘exprime’ o seu acento de valor como ‘a verdade’ ao posicionar-se a favor da reforma*” (RODRIGUES, 2005, p. 173).

interaction between the stability of meaning, which allows its recognition in different contexts, and relative viability, according to the thematic reality of social tensions. *Marxism and the philosophy of language* approaches the *theme* as the concrete situation itself, the total meaning of the utterance, unrepeatable, in dialogue with the meaning composed of elements that are repeated and identical, with a certain stability. Therefore, the meaning, when giving shape to the *theme*, originates the word that is understood in a particular sense.

With this in mind, would it be possible to affirm that the genres focus on both the theme and the meaning, for its effective realization? The answer could be affirmative, since theme and meaning are in a continuum, and it is not possible to restrict the understanding of genre only to meaning, for example. The genre materializes linguistically, presents relative stabilization, endowed with meaning, which allows it to deal with its regulatory character for the construction, finishing and evaluation of the utterance. This meaning will give shape to the enunciation theme, originating the genre, in a particular sense, that is, in its composition there are elements that come from other social discourses, but that are renewed, with each new social situation of interaction. Therefore, like Bakhtin/Medvedev (1978 [1928]), Bakhtin understands that the genre is collectively oriented, in reality, towards a possible finish.

### Dialogues between the works regarding the concept of *theme*

Reading the Circle’s works reveals the importance of the links between them, in order to better delimit the concepts that are addressed by scholars, over the years. In general, it was possible to understand general trends in the comprehension of the *theme* concept as: (1) total sense of the utterance, event, reality and moment in which content and form interact axiologically; (2) relationship between meaning and value of the ideological sign; and (3) the object of the utterance (see Table 2).

**Table 2** – Understanding on the theme in some texts of the Circle.

| Tendencies   | Texts   | Some general features on the topic <sup>18</sup>   |
|--|---|--|
| (1) theme as a total sense of utterance, event, reality and moment in which content and form interact axiologically. | <i>Toward a philosophy of the act</i><br>(Bakhtin, 1920-1924)                           | • “meaning” that is made up of the links between the repeatable and unrepeatable portions of the act.  |
|  | <i>The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art</i><br>(Bakhtin, 1923-1924) | • the reality that enters the work and becomes an indispensable element;<br>• the significant moment in which they interact axiologically: content and form. |
|  | <i>Discourse in life and discourse in art</i><br>(Vološinov, 1926)                      | • the “total meaning” of an utterance, “global significance” and “total content” of the discourse.   |

<sup>18</sup> Here are some of the characteristics on the works summarized at the end of each section.

| Tendencies   | Texts  | Some general features on the topic <sup>18</sup>   |
|--|--|--|
| (2) theme as a relation between meaning and valuation of the ideological sign. | <i>The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship</i> (Bakhtin/ Medvedev, 1928)   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• it is constituted with the help of the language, transcending it;</li> <li>• theme of the whole of utterance;</li> <li>• inseparable from its original orientation in reality, from spatial and temporal circumstances;</li> <li>• it corresponds to the thematic unit;</li> <li>• it cannot be completed in the utterance.</li> </ul>  |
|  | <i>Marxism and the philosophy of language</i> (Vološinov, 1929)              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• it is the reality that gives rise to the formation of a sign, called the theme of the sign;</li> <li>• it is the reality that participates in the constitution of the utterance;</li> <li>• it is the expression of a concrete historical situation;</li> <li>• it must not be confused with the theme of a work of art;</li> <li>• it comes close to the concept of “thematic unity”;</li> <li>• it is the meaning of the complete utterance;</li> <li>• it is endowed with meaning and needs the form of the utterance to materialize;</li> <li>• it is individual, repeatable, flexible and dynamic;</li> <li>• higher stage of the linguistic ability to signify;</li> <li>• linked to relative viability.</li> </ul> |
|  | <i>The word and its social function</i> (Vološinov, 1983b [1930])            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fragment of reality.</li> </ul>   |
| (3) theme as the object of the utterance.                                      | <i>The Construction of the Utterance</i> (Vološinov, 1983a [1930])           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• object or theme covered by the utterance.</li> </ul>  |
|  | <i>Discourse in the Novel</i> (Bakhtin, 1934-1935)                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• designated as a specific object of the romance genre;</li> <li>• defined as the man who speaks and his word.</li> </ul>   |
|  | <i>Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel</i> (Bakhtin, 1937-1938) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understood as content/object of the novel.</li> </ul>   |
|  | <i>Rabelais and His World</i> (Bakhtin, 1940)                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understood as content/object of the novel.</li> </ul>   |
|  | <i>The problem of speech genres</i> (Bakhtin, 1951-1953)                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• focused on the object of utterance;</li> <li>• the theme of utterance/thematic content of utterance and the typical theme/thematic content of genre.</li> </ul>   |

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The study on the subject leads us to reaffirm how complex it is to reflect on this key concept. The trends exposed here are interpretive possibilities that may reveal that, within the Circle itself, scholars had different understandings on the subject.

When thinking chronologically, in the texts from 1920 to 1926 (although it is practically impossible to think of such punctual limits when dealing with aspects of language), as well as in their authorship, the tendency (1) is marked, mainly, in function of the comprehension of the *theme* as being the total meaning of the utterance, the event, the reality and the moment in which content and form interact axiologically. In *Toward a philosophy of the act* (BAKHTIN, 1993), the author deals with this sense as a result of the links between the repeatable and the unrepeatable, an idea also present in

*The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art* (BAKHTIN, 1990), when addressing the link between fact and singularity. In the sequence, Bakhtin points out that the aesthetic content/object is the reality of knowledge and the act that has been unified. Therefore, it is within this larger, significant reality, also called a unique and open event, that the content (fragment of that reality) is constituted and signified. In *Discourse in life and discourse in art* (1926), Vološinov addresses the total meaning, that is, the broader semantic context of the utterance which involves, in addition to the verbal aspect, the extraverbal, defined according to the spatial horizons; common understanding of the situation and its assessment. Therefore, the *theme* would be in a broader/higher scope of meaning, and, inside, the objects/contents are signified.

From 1928 to 1930, in Bakhtin/Medvedev and Vološinov's texts, there is a greater focus on meaning (2), that is, the *theme* focused on the relationship between meaning and value of the ideological sign. In *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), Bakhtin/Medvedev addresses the impossibility of thematic finish and the notion that genres are thematically oriented towards life events. In this way, the *theme* is the theme of the whole utterance, not equaling the notion of content, this seen as capable of finishing relative to what is said (idea already outlined in the essay *The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art*, from 1923 to 1924).

In this context, *Marxism and the philosophy of language* (1929) is presented, which addresses the *theme* in relation to the notions of meaning and valuation. Vološinov takes over some assumptions from previous texts, such as the idea that the theme is the meaning of the complete utterance; the notion that the *theme* covers its realization, not to be confused with the theme of a work of art, for example, according to formalist precepts. More than that, the author considers the theme as the reality that gives rise to the formation of a sign and as the concrete historical situation that gives rise to the utterance (a notion that will be resumed in 1930, in the essay *The word and its social function*).

In addition, the theme is based on a certain stability, something already pointed out by Bakhtin/Medvedev when he affirms that the theme is constituted with the help of language; however, both Bakhtin/Medvedev and Vološinov agree that the *theme* cannot be taken as an element of the language. Vološinov postulates that signification refers to a semiotic system with the power to signify, within a concrete *theme*, that is why it is made up of reiterable and identical elements. Without this "stability of meaning", the *theme* would lose its link with what precedes and what follows. Thus, the understanding of the meaning of a linguistic element can occur at the limit of the *theme* (upper), when it comes to the contextual meaning of the word, as a concrete utterance, and/or at the limit of meaning (lower), with the study of the word in the system, but with the power to mean within the scope of the *theme*.

In 1930, in the essay *The construction of the utterance*, Vološinov addresses the general meaning of the entire enunciation again, resuming, in a very clear way, the aspects of the extraverbal, presented in *Discourse in life and discourse in art*. At that moment, he addresses the space and time in which the utterance occurs; the "object or

theme that the utterance is about” (“that which” is spoken of) and the attitude of the speakers. The author uses the alternative conjunction “or”, with the idea of alternation, of option, therefore, the object of the utterance would be equivalent to the *theme*, differing from *Discourse in life and discourse in art* which addresses the “object of the utterance”, untriggering the concept theme.

From then on, from 1930 to 1953, in texts signed, for the most part, by Bakhtin, the understanding of the theme becomes more clearly related to the object of the utterance. In *Discourse in the Novel* (1934-1935), Bakhtin deals with the “specific object of the romanesque genre”, with the theme: “the man who speaks and his word”. The same is true in *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* (1937-1938) and in *Rabelais and His World* (1940).

In *The problem of speech genres* (1951-1953), the focus is on genres as relatively stable types, according to the historical perspective of language. Bakhtin, then, postulates that the objects of discourse become “theme of the utterance”, acquiring particularity and relatively completed aspect, that is, *theme* and thematic content can be understood as equivalent. As already explained, for example, in *The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art* (1923-1924) and *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), content is a fragment of a reality, of a broader situation, extraverbal, a fact that is taken up in the chapter of genres. The idea of exhausting the semantic-object content reveals the possibility of finishing the object of meaning, disagreeing with the notions of theme proposed, for example, in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928) and *Marxism and the philosophy of language* (1929), which reveal the impossibility of concluding the *theme*.

In addition, in the essay of genres, Bakhtin states that they can be conceived according to social typification, with certain common regularities that have been constituted in human activities. As a result, the genre presents a typical theme (or thematic content of the genre), determined within the sphere of a sphere and situation.

In general, the trend texts (1) do not explicitly use the term *theme*, as the authors indicate, discussions focused on the meanings which are established of the links between repeatable and unrepeatable portions of the statement and the reality which enters the work and constitutes it. The concept is addressed, from 1928 to 1930 (trend 2), in the texts by Bakhtin/Medvedev and Vološinov, indicating the *theme* as the theme of the whole utterance, not corresponding to the notion of content, but to the thematic unity. This is because, for Bakhtin/Medvedev, the *theme* cannot be concluded. In *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, Vološinov continues this perspective and brings the *theme* to the heart of the discussions as a relationship between meaning and valuation within the scope of the ideological sign. In this way, the meaning, when giving form to the *theme*, originates from the word understood in a particular sense. Already in trend (3), Bakhtin’s works reveal the *theme* as the object of the utterance, as it gains relative conclusiveness due to the production conditions defined by the author, therefore, the author deals with the “theme of the utterance”/“thematic content”

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to discuss the theme conception and related concepts epistemologically and theoretically, in the works of the Bakhtin Circle. What, at first, could be considered a simple “literature review”, proved to be hard work and necessary for the understanding of a key concept which, at times, is not the most studied, but which proved to be fundamental for understanding language as a social action.

The understanding of the *theme* concept is based on a set of texts from different periods, in order to constitute the architecture of the Circle’s thinking. According to Brait (2016), in reading the texts, it is up to the readers, according to their interests, to establish the order which responds to their needs. Within the limits to which this text was restricted, we hope to have contributed to new reflections on the concept, opening up new opportunities for writing about the theme, in order to consider it in relation to other key concepts, such as valuation, dialogical relations, chronotope, understanding etc.

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FUZA, A.; RODRIGUES, R. A concepção de tema nas obras do círculo de Bakhtin. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v.66, 2022.

- *RESUMO: O estudo da significação é uma das problemáticas mais complexas da Linguística, segundo os pressupostos de Bakhtin e do Círculo. Nesse ínterim, o tema, um dos conceitos-chave, embora não seja o mais estudado pelo Círculo, torna-se essencial para a compreensão da linguagem como ação concreta. Este artigo, de escopo bibliográfico, objetiva discutir, epistemológica e teoricamente, a concepção de tema e os conceitos a ele relacionados nos trabalhos do Círculo, especificamente, Bakhtin, Volochínov e Medviédev. Para tanto, o texto retoma as considerações a respeito do tema nas obras desses autores, a observar seu desdobramento, no decorrer dos anos. Os resultados apontam que há variações, nos textos, em relação ao conceito, o que possibilitou depreender algumas tendências em seu entendimento: (1) tema como o sentido total da enunciação, o acontecimento, a realidade e o momento no qual, axiologicamente, interagem conteúdo e forma; (2) tema como a relação entre significação e valoração do signo ideológico; e (3) tema como objeto da enunciação/do enunciado.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Tema; Círculo de Bakhtin; sentido total da enunciação; relação entre significação e valoração; objeto da enunciação.*

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