

# IDEOLOGY, PRODUCTIVE POWERS AND SIGNIFICATION PROCESSES: THE WORD *SELFIE* AS AN IDEOLOGICAL SIGN

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- **ABSTRACT:** Based on the assumption that the foundations of the linguistic theory of the Bakhtin Circle (which results from the combination of Voloshinov, Medvedev and Bakhtin works) are constructed in dialogue with theoretical traditions among which Marxism plays an important role, this paper discusses aspects related to the way the understanding of this group about the status of relations between infrastructure and superstructure is linked to the concept of ideological sign. Considering that and using mainly the notions of reflection and refraction, the paper focuses on the word *selfie*, trying to analyze it as a sign in which ideas, meanings and values are condensed, associated with reorganization processes of the productive forces in the contemporary world and, in this line of reasoning, the paper proposes the conclusion that this word, illustrating exemplary propositions of the Circle about the linkages between the socio-economic life and the prevailing ideas in society, can be seen as a territory of signs in which fundamental features of the contemporary society are reflected and refracted.
- **KEYWORDS:** Ideology. Discourse. Bakhtin Circle. Ideological sign. Infrastructure. Superstructure.

## Introduction

The line of thought developed by the group known in the Western world as the Bakhtin Circle<sup>1</sup> has become, in the past few years, one of the most important theoretical sources for studies interested in discourse as an activity of language constituted *in* and *by* interaction processes developed in the scope of historically situated social practices. Since the foundations of this line of thought were formed in a dialogue with different

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<sup>1</sup> There is not enough room here to approach the controversies related to the Circle, which extend from the authorship of the so-called disputed texts to the effective existence of a circle around Bakhtin and the true role he played in this group. For the benefit of clarity, it seems fit to register that, in consonance with the positions held by Costa (2014), the works of Medvedev, Voloshinov and Bakhtin are assumed in this article as individual productions that are related to shared preoccupations and a common background conception of language. From this perspective, the authors of the works herein discussed are considered as those under whose name they were originally published. For a deeper discussion on the aforementioned controversies, see, among others, Sériot (2010), Bronckart and Bota (2012), Vasilev (2006) and Morson and Emerson (2008).

traditions present in the Russian intellectual context of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, my goal in this article, which resumes and elaborates on propositions made by Costa (2014), is to discuss the ‘dialogue’ of the Circle with the Marxist tradition and explore the idea that one of the main aspects of the language conception proposed by the group (in which the ideological nature of the sign is very important) is based upon a certain understanding of the relations between, on the one hand, means and processes of production and reproduction of material existence and, on the other, ideas, images, values, meanings and senses circulating in the many spheres of social life; in other words, that which, in Marxist tradition, is known as base and superstructure. Going along the lines of analyses suggested by this conception, I afterwards focus on the word *selfie*, with the purpose of showing aspects in which this word, precisely in its quality of ideological sign, interacts with the question of relations between the productive powers and the signification processes in society.

### The science of ideologies and its dialogue with Marxism

The presence of the *base-superstructure* subject in the work of the Circle is particularly perceptible in the texts written by Medvedev and Voloshinov, and blatantly apparent in the fact that the work they develop in the 1920s is guided by the construction project of a science of ideologies. This project, in conformity with the agenda of the Institute for Comparative History of Literatures and Languages of West and East – ILIaZV<sup>2</sup> –, to which both scholars belonged, is clearly explicit in Medvedev’s case in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (MEDVIÉDEV, 1978 [1928]). As for Voloshinov, allusions to this purpose can be found in, for example, the *Rapport d’activité à L’ILJAZV pour l’année académique 1927-1928* (VOLOSHINOV, 2010 [1928]) and in *Marxism and the philosophy of language* (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929]).

Although they have incorporated into their conception of language a personal understanding of the ideological phenomenon, which deviated in certain aspects from orthodox Marxism, one of the initial references for their work is the way Marxist tradition (disseminated in Russia, at that moment, mainly by the works of authors such as Plekhanov (1978 [1908]; 1987 [1897]) and Bukharin (1970 [1921])) perceives the relation between systems of ideas, values and meanings (moral, philosophical, esthetic, scientific, religious, etc.) and the socio-economic reality, or, in other words, between society’s *ideological superstructures* and *material base*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Research institute from Leningrad, where, during the 1920s, many linguistic and literary studies were produced and where, besides Medvedev and Voloshinov, researchers such as Boris Eichenbaum, Boris Tomachevski, Vladimir Shishmarev, Viktor Zhirmunski, Lev Shcerba and Lev Iakubinski worked. For the importance of the institute in the Soviet intellectual scenery, see Brandist (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Connections between the work of the Bakhtin Circle and Marxist authors such as, for example, Bukharin, Plekhanov and Lukacs, served as an object of interest for many scholars, among which Brandist (2000; 2002) and Tihanov (1998; 2000). For the relations between the Circle and Marxism considered from the dichotomy “primary genres-secondary genres”, it is worth verifying Grillo (2008).

Deference to this tradition is stamped right in the first few pages of *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), where Medvedev presents the theoretical frame to which the proposal of a science of ideologies affiliates itself:

The bases of the study [science]<sup>4</sup> of ideologies (in the form of a general definition of ideological superstructures, their function in the whole of social life, their relationship to the economic base, and some of their interrelationships as well) have been profoundly and firmly established by Marxism (MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p.3).

Further on, incorporation to the Marxist canon is reaffirmed when, reiterating one of the basic principles of this canon, Medvedev emphasizes the idea that forms of consciousness are determined by material existence and sustains that the ideological environment

[...] is the realized, materialized, externally expressed social consciousness of a given collective. It is determined by the collective's economic existence and, in turn, determines the individual consciousness of each member of the collective (MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p.14).

In the same text, however, Medvedev indicates the Circle's detachment from positions held by the orthodoxy and refuses the idea that this determination occurs in a mechanical way and that, therefore, the superstructure is a direct reflection of the base. In his opinion,

Marxists often do not fully appreciate the concrete unity, variety, and importance of the ideological environment, and move too quickly and too directly from the separate ideological phenomenon to conditions of the socioeconomic environment. This is to lose sight of the fact that the separate phenomenon is only a dependent part of the concrete ideological environment and that it is directly determined by this environment in the most immediate way. It is just as naïve to think that separate works, which have been snatched out of the unity of the ideological world, are in their isolation directly determined by economic factors as it is to think that a poem's rhymes and stanzas are fitted together according to economic causality (MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p.15).

A similar opinion to Medvedev's is held by Voloshinov, who dedicates the entire second chapter of *Marxism and the philosophy of language* (1929) precisely to the

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<sup>4</sup> I insert the word *science* in square brackets to indicate that, in this paper, I follow the understanding of the translators Ekaterina Vólkova and Sheila Grillo (MEDVIÉDEV, 2012), for whom the term *hayka*, used by Medvedev in the original text, should be translated into Portuguese as *ciência*.

examination of the “Concerning the Relation of the Basis and Superstructures”. Here, just as Medvedev had done, Voloshinov also assumes the Marxist references as a parameter and, further developing propositions that were already present in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), rejects the idea that relationships between base and superstructure can be explained by mechanical causality. In his view, an adequate understanding of those relationships must consider the specificities and mutual influence of different ideological spheres, in which, under the action of different mediations, the conditioning for the base is reflected and refracted.

Thus, Voloshinov turns the Marxist epistemological matrix into the main interlocutor for the formulation of his propositions regarding how language dialogues with the problem of relations between production and reproduction methods of socio-material existence and the ideological superstructures. At the same time, following the example of Medvedev, he does not shirk from pointing out his detachment from orthodox Marxism in some crucial aspects. Firstly, by signaling to the conditioning reciprocity between base and superstructure.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, by stating that the economic structure’s determinations not only are reflected, but are also refracted in the sign.

This is a fundamental aspect in which the Circle marks its vision on ideology and signals to the uniqueness of its understanding in regards to the controversial dichotomy base-superstructure, which, initially employed by Marx and Engels to fight off idealism (which attributed to ideas the main role in historical processes) and to sustain the determining character of material existence and productive relations in configuring the social whole, became in ulterior developments an excessively schematic and reductionist model of society description, understood, through the mechanical application of this model, as a linear and vertical reality constituted by two overlapped levels or layers: a material base and, above and after it, an ideological superstructure that would be the later a *reflection* (inverted or not) of the relationships kept at base level. Such a path, as Williams (1977, p.59) points out, ended up weakening the critical potential of Marx’s construct and, by succumbing to the “naïve dualism of ‘mechanical materialism’”, lost sight of the explanation of reality as a totality in which ideas and consciousness, albeit determined by socio-material existence, are also, simultaneously and indissolubly, components of this existence.

One of the ways in which this reductionism gained importance was through the tendency of perceiving the correspondences between the superstructure phenomena and the base elements in the form of resemblances. Examples of this procedure can be found even in the work of great Marxists, such as Bukharin (1970 [1921], p.194) (in the passage in which he compares the separation of body and soul, in the religious sphere, to the separation between directors and executors, at the factory production level), and Plekhanov (1978 [1908], p.66) (when he states that “Descartes’s philosophy reflects

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<sup>5</sup> This understanding is present in the text, for example, in the following passage: “The problem of the interrelationship of the basis and superstructures – 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” (1973 [1929], p.18-19).

very vividly the needs of economic evolution” or that “the intellectual movement’s turn takes a parallel direction to the economic development’s and social and political development’s turn, being also conditioned by what preceded it”).

In critical dialogue with this tradition, the work of the Circle preferred to explore elements of Marxism without necessarily adhering to the mechanical inclinations of some of its branches and, with respect to relationships between the socio-economic reality and the ideological superstructures, this was revealed, for example, in the understanding that the determinations of the first over the latter occur not only through *reflexive* operations, but also *refracting* ones. With such a perspective, to perceive the ways in which this happens is precisely one of the tasks of the study of ideologies:

Looked at from the angle of our concerns, the essence of this problem comes down to *how* actual existence (the basis) determines sign and *how* sign reflects and refracts existence in its process of generation (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.19).

It is in this framework that, during the 1920s, the Circle’s understanding of the relations between base and superstructure will build close ties to its conception of *ideological sign*.

### **Ideological sign and social psychology**

In disagreement with the dominating position in the most divulged form of Marxism, the Circle proposes an original way of understanding the relations between base and superstructure. By associating the notion of *reflex* with the idea of *refraction*, the group conceives society’s ideology as an array of meanings and senses materialized in sign-objects and in concrete *utterances* in which the determinations emanated from society’s economic and political structures are reflected and refracted.<sup>6</sup>

Being inserted into discursive and social practices in different spheres of activity and communication, these sign-objects and concrete utterances are, consequently, territories in which (under the action of diverse mediations, for instance the mediation of discursive genres) the negotiations, disputes and, consequently, the power relations manifest themselves, in a reflected and refracted manner.

One of the original aspects of this conception resides precisely in the fact that the sign (and ultimately, the utterance) is regarded as an inherently conflict-ridden terrain, since the material reality (the being) that manifests itself in it is the dialectic result of a process of contradictions and antagonisms. In Voloshinov’s (1973 [1929], p.23) words:

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed argument on the ideas regarding *reflection* and *refraction* in Russia in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Bondarenko (2008).

Existence reflected in sign is not merely reflected but refracted. How is this refraction of existence in the ideological sign determined? By an intersecting of differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community, i.e., by the class struggle.

According to this perspective, the sign-objects and the utterances in which and through which ideology is constituted are also arenas where, somewhat differently, social struggles and disputes between society's opposing positions take place.

Here we also see perfect harmony with the argument developed by Medvedev, who, in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), states:

Let us imagine that two inimical social groups have at their disposal the same linguistic material, absolutely the same lexicon, the same morphological and syntactical possibilities, etc.

Under these conditions, if the differences between our two social groups arise from important socioeconomic premises of their existences, the intonation of one and the same word will differ profoundly between groups; within the very same grammatical constructions the semantic and stylistic combinations will be profoundly different. One and the same word will occupy a completely different hierarchical place in the utterance as a concrete social act.

The combination of words in the concrete utterance or the literary performance is always determined by their value coefficients and the social conditions under which the utterance is produced (MEDVEDEV, 1978 [1928], p.123-124).

Moving even further on this line of thought, Voloshinov believes that, just like ideology, the sign (and, ultimately, the utterance) gains its form not as a mere representation (or reflection) of reality, but as a domain in which the image of reality that is projected is a disputed and negotiated image, riddled by struggles and conflicting appreciative accents, and, for this reason, a refracted image, virtually transformed.

Another aspect that is equally important to Voloshinov in regard to the base-superstructure relation is the role enacted by mediations, among which social psychology deserves to be highlighted; already present in Plekhanov's and Bukharin's systematization, it is understood as a diffused array of beliefs, "fragmented notions", "disperse ideas", "unthought-of values", "ways of thinking", "established opinions", "tastes", "diverse judgments", "unthought-of representations" (BUKHARIN, 1970 [1921], p.244), which are not yet organized in the established ideological systems (moral, science, philosophy, religion, etc.).

So, as we can see, for these authors there is a contiguity and implicational relation between social psychology and ideology: the latter is a deperation of the former. In this sense, Bukharin (1970 [1921], p.253, emphasis in the original) says:

Social psychology is, in a certain way, a deposit for ideology (...) We saw in the beginning of this paragraph that ideology becomes distinct because of a larger systematization of its elements, that is, of thoughts, feelings, sensations, images etc. What does ideology systematize? It systematizes that which has been little or not at all systematized, that is, social psychology. *Ideologies are the crystallization of social psychology.*

Almost the same conception appears in Voloshinov, to whom social psychology, also called *behavioral [life] ideology*,<sup>7</sup> maintains an organic relationship with ideological systems. One difference worth mentioning, as stated by Tihanov (1998), is that, while Bukharin seems to concede a role of superiority to ideology, diminishing social psychology's relevance, Voloshinov bestows on the latter great importance, considering it a vital nurturer of established ideologies. In a reasoning that recaptures and, at the same time, surpasses Bukharin's, he sustains that

[...] the established ideological systems of social ethics, science, art, and religion are crystallizations of behavioral [life] ideology, and these crystallizations, in turn, exert a powerful influence back upon behavioral [life] ideology, normally setting its tone. At the same time, however, these already formalized ideological products constantly maintain the most vital organic contact with behavioral [life] ideology and draw sustenance from it; otherwise, without that contact, they would be dead, just as any literary work or cognitive idea is dead without living, evaluative perception of it (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.91).

Therefore, in regards to the way Voloshinov conceives relations between base and ideological superstructures, social psychology (or life ideology) is of capital importance because, "on one side, it links up directly with the processes of production; on the other, it is tangent to the spheres of the various specialized and fully fledged ideologies" (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.14).

In this condition of intermediary domain, it is the place where the great processes and movements of ideas are conceived, later to be organized and formalized in established

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<sup>7</sup> In Voloshinov's own words: "[...] we may say that behavioral [life] ideology in our conception corresponds basically to what is termed 'social psychology' in Marxist literature" (1973 [1929], p.91). I insert the word *life* in square brackets to indicate that here I follow the understanding of Tihanov (1998), for whom a more appropriate translation for the original Russian construction *жизненная идеология* would be *life-ideology*, marking, thus, the echoes of *Lebensphilosophie* in the ideology conception explored in *Marxism and the philosophy of language* and in later works of Bakhtin, such as *Discourse in the novel* (1934-35) and *Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (1940).

ideological systems. This is where we can find the embryonic forms of senses and meanings that will build up until they crystallize into ideas, values and patterns established in society. “Chit-chats”, “exchange of opinions”, accidental interactions and other modes of daily life communication are, according to Voloshinov, the raw material, the submerged forms of continuous ideological creation. It is this type of communication that accumulates “the barely noticeable shifts and changes that will later find expression in fully fledged ideological products” (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.20).

### **The importance of word and the method for studying ideological signs**

Understanding the ways in which the socio-economic structure relates to the ideological universe, without forgetting to consider life ideology’s mediation and the processes of reflection and refraction of the being in the sign, is, therefore, one of the basic tasks of the science of ideologies and implies in certain conditions and procedures. To begin with, we should not ignore the fact that the sign is a result of struggle and negotiation procedures between socially organized and interacting individuals, reason why, according to Voloshinov, its forms (of the sign) “*are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction*” (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.21, emphasis in original).

Thus, changes in the individuals’ sociomaterial organization will be felt in the circulating signs. According to Voloshinov (1973 [1929], p.21),

[...] only so approached can the problem of the *relationship between sign and existence* find its concrete expression; only then will the process of the causal shaping of the sign by existence stand out as a process of genuine existence-to-sign transit, of genuine dialectical refraction of existence in the sign.

The direction for this work of comprehending determination processes of the sign by the being, that is, by the sociomaterial existence, is not previously at hand. It is a construction, to which Voloshinov suggests a few steps, some “methodologic prerequisites” (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.21). Firstly, he says, “*ideology may not be divorced from the material reality of sign*” (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.21, emphasis in original), positioning it, as done by idealist subjectivism, in the level of individual conscience, or in any “other vague and elusive regions” (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.21). Secondly, it is necessary not to separate the sign “*from the concrete forms of social intercourse*” (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.21, emphasis in original), that is, always consider it in the midst of a historical and socially situated system of communication, out of which the sign is no more than a physical object. Thirdly, it is indispensable not to separate the communication and its forms from the material basis (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.21).



The necessity of not separating signs from communication processes in which they are situated is a recurrent topic in Voloshinov's argumentation and strengthens the idea that sign-objects and concrete utterances are important bonds of a great network, produced and put into circulation in the midst of society's discursive flow and communication chain. It is in this framework of social communication network that verbal interaction occurs, with the consequent production and circulation of utterances. Verbal communication, as Voloshinov says in his text *La structure de l'énoncé*, from 1930, "is not but one of the many forms of becoming of the social community, and where, at discourse level, the (verbal) interaction occurs" (VOLOSHINOV, 1981 [1930], p.288).<sup>8</sup> And, further on, in the same text: "*the true essence of language is the social event that consists of a verbal interaction and that gains form through one or more utterances*" (VOLOSHINOV, 1981 [1930], p.288, emphasis in the original).<sup>9</sup>

As he indicates in *Marxism and the philosophy of language* (1929), once more, in this text from 1930, Voloshinov proposes an understanding of utterance production focused on its relationship with the base; and, reproducing, *mutatis mutandis*, the five-stage model applied by Plekhanov,<sup>10</sup> presents a scheme through which the utterance (the concrete unit of discursive communication) should be studied. At the basis of this scheme is the economic organization of society. On top of this foundation, we find, on one level, the relationships that form social communication and, on another, verbal interaction. Next come the utterances and, lastly, language's grammatical forms.

Since the utterance is the main territory of reflection and refraction of the conditionings of society's material organization, it is not surprising that the word is granted great importance. Not, of course, to the word as it appears in the dictionary, but to the word-utterance. On this matter, we may notice a great convergence between authors, including Bakhtin, who, in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Work*, from 1929, proves to be in complete acceptance of the positions held by Medvedev and Voloshinov, by stating:

The word is not a thing, but the eternally moving, eternally mutable environment of social exchange. It is never enough to one voice alone, one lonely conscience. The life of the word is in the passing from mouth to mouth, from one context to another, from one social group to another, from one generation to another [...] This is why the position of a word between words, the many ways in which someone else's word can be understood and the different reactions it may produce are, perhaps, the

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<sup>8</sup> Original: "[...] *la communication verbale n'est elle-même qu'une des nombreuses formes du devenir de la communauté sociale où a lieu, au niveau du discours, l'interaction (verbale).*"

<sup>9</sup> Original: "*L'essence véritable du langage, c'est l'événement social qui consiste en une interaction verbale, et se trouve concretisé en un ou plusieurs énoncés.*"

<sup>10</sup> According to Tihanov (1998, p.603), the five-stage model, or *piatichlenka*, is the name of the model used by Plekhanov (1978 [1908], p.62) to describe, in levels, the way a society functions, using the relationship between productive powers and ideological superstructures.

essential problems of a sociology of the word – of every word, here included the artistic word (BACHTIN, 1997 [1929], p.210-211).<sup>11</sup>

In Voloshinov, the importance of the word is specially highlighted by a series of characteristics that turn it into the ideological sign *par excellence*: semiotic purity, ideological neutrality,<sup>12</sup> participation in human daily communication, possibility of functioning as an interior sign and necessary presence in all conscious human acts. Besides, the word plays a fundamental role in verbal interaction at the social psychology level, that is, life ideology level, because, according to Voloshinov, “the material of behavioral [life] communication is preeminently the word. The locale of so-called conversational language and its forms is precisely here, in the area of behavioral [life] ideology” (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.14).

For its social ubiquity, the word penetrates into all social relationships and, therefore, it

[...] is the most sensitive *index of social changes*, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularized and fully defined ideological systems. The word is the medium in which occur the slow quantitative accretions of those changes which have not yet achieved the status of new ideological quality, not yet produced a new and fully-fledged ideological form. The word has the capacity to register all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.19, emphasis in original).

Such a characterization is made in a context in which Voloshinov is discussing the connection between the word (as sign) and the question of the relationship between base and superstructure. This is when he asserts that “the material of the verbal sign allows one most fully and easily to follow out the continuity of the dialectical process of change, a process which goes from the basis to superstructures” (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.24).

With this perspective, there is no one better than it, the word, to show us the historical processes that, while related to transformations in the world of productive

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<sup>11</sup> Original: “*La parola non è una cosa, ma l’ambiente eternamente mobile, eternamente mutevole dello scambio sociale. Essa non è mai sufficiente a una sola voce, una sola coscienza. La vita della parola è nel passaggio di bocca in bocca, da un contesto all’altro, da un coletivo sociale all’altro, da una generazione a un’altra generazione [...] È per questo che l’orientamento della parola altrui e i diversi modi di reagire ad essa sono, forse, i problemi essenziali della sociologia della parola – di ogni parola, ivi compresa quella artistica.*”

<sup>12</sup> According to Voloshinov, word’s neutrality refers to the fact that it can operate as a sign in any role and in any ideological sphere: “The word”, he says, “is not only the purest, most indicatory sign but is, in addition, a neutral sign ... it can carry out ideological functions of any kind – scientific, aesthetic, ethical, religious” (VOLOSHINOV, 1973 [1929], p.14, emphasis in original).

powers and socioeconomic relations, are also felt in the world of ideas and discursive communication in society.

### The word *selfie* as an index of contemporary transformations

Based on these theoretical and methodological propositions, this paper aims at focusing on the word *selfie* as a very illustrative sign of the way in which changes in the forms of organizing production are related to alterations in interaction processes and in ethical, esthetic and cognitive references and patterns in effect nowadays.

That such a sign has reached great importance in the communication processes of the contemporary society (and specially in those situated in daily communication) can be testified by the distinction granted to it by the *Oxford Dictionary*, which, in 2013, offered *selfie* the title of ‘word of the year’, justifying this decision based on its overwhelming success: that same year, the frequency with which the word was used went up 17.000%.<sup>13</sup>

In search of its origins, the same dictionary, according to Carpim (2014), traced its use back to 2002, when a man with face wounds caused by a domestic incident took a picture of his own face and published it in an *online* Australian forum and called it a *selfie*. Regardless of this having been or not the first or one of the first uses of the word, the fact is that, since then, both the word and its referent have been closely tied to the interaction processes that progress through the utilization of new information and communication technologies. Therefore, *selfie* cannot be mistaken for *self-portrait*. Albeit sharing familiar ties, the elements of reality to which the signs point at are different. While a self-portrait designates, in general, an image, painting or photograph that someone produces of himself, *selfie* and its referent are essentially phenomena of the contemporary world, indissociable from social, inter-rational and discursive practices that are characteristic of network communication and of virtual environments and technological platforms. It is no accident that its meaning is described by the *Oxford Dictionary* as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media”.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the very meaning of *selfie* already places the word in a specific historical-social time-space, covering a set of specific traces of this time-space, such as virtuality, technologization, fluidity and online communications.

The morphosemantic structure of the word, which is the concrete basis for this characterization, also reveals important things. Firstly, the morpheme *self*<sup>15</sup> indicates

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the following links: <[blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases\\_oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013](http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases_oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013)>; <[www.bbc.co.uk/portuguese/noticias/2013/11/131119\\_selfie\\_oxford\\_fn](http://www.bbc.co.uk/portuguese/noticias/2013/11/131119_selfie_oxford_fn)> and <[www.dn.pt\\_inicio\\_globo\\_interior.aspx\\_content\\_id=3540144](http://www.dn.pt_inicio_globo_interior.aspx_content_id=3540144)>.

<sup>14</sup> See <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>>. Visited in: 20 apr. 2016.

<sup>15</sup> “A person’s essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action”. See <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>>. Visited in: 20 apr. 2016.

that the information in the real world of which it speaks is *one's self*, pointing out to a certain precedence of the *I* in our times. Secondly, the suffix *ie* (also spelled *y*, in the variant form *selfy*) declares that to this *one's self*, which has become a noun, are added semantemes of affectivity and informality,<sup>16</sup> making the word compatible with interaction processes situated chiefly at the daily communication level, domain in which, in the understanding of the Circle, the embryonic forms that may become crystallized ideologies in organized systems are found. Another important aspect that may be inferred from the word's physiognomy is the fact that it is a form used in the whole world in its original language, regardless of translation, which proves that it is a globalized word, typical of a society connected through the intertwining of multiple networks.

Consequently, when the communication situations in which the word is usually employed are considered, the very use of the sign *selfie* already draws forth a set of images, perceptions, ideas and appreciations that are intrinsically tied to the contemporary society. In association with the technological progress and inherently tied to the new ways of building identities and configuring the body through interactions mediated by computers and other technological devices, such appreciations, embedded in the senses that circulate in society's discursive flow, tend to be mainly positive and manifest their principal effects on the subject's feeling of being a protagonist, on the speed and precision of the image-capturing mechanism, on the speed of the communication process and on the feeling of connection and flow through the networks, among others.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, considering the Circle's terms as formulated by Voloshinov, we may, through this characterization, speak of a semiotic constitution that, in many elements of the word, reflects and refracts the society's productive organization, turning *selfie* into a good illustration of the way in which ideology and material existence intertwine and interact in language. Showing the immanently ideological nature of the meanings and senses that circulate in society, the word *selfie* can be seen, thus, as a good example of the links that tie determinations of the economic system to forms of signifying and attributing senses to reality. In it are crystallized elements that are originally associated to the universe of material production and production relations. These elements also act as determining factors in the interaction systems, in socializing forms, in cognitive models, in space-time references and, ultimately, in the ways of understanding and representing human existence that are embedded in the sign-establishing and enunciative practices related to social and economic order that has been shaped in most of the world in the past four or five decades.

In this small word processes are gathered that are unleashed by the vast reorganization of the productive system and that also operate in other domains of society and produce

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<sup>16</sup> Affectivity and informality are attested by the fact that this suffix is used, according to the same dictionary, to form diminutives, nicknames and hypocorisms (such as *nightie*, *auntie*, *Tommy*, *foodie*, *Francie*, etc.). See <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>>. Visited in: 20 apr. 2016.

<sup>17</sup> On the relationships between information and communication technologies and identity construction forms, as well as the use of images for configuring the body and subjectivities in the virtual world, see, among others, Recuero and Rebs (2013), Sibilia (2004), Lemos (2002), Recuero (2009) and Santaella (2008).

transformations in the creation and circulation of signs and utterances in the most varied spheres of activity and communication. Anchored to the great development of information and communication technologies and to certain forms of appropriation of science and of incorporation of knowledge to economic and social life, these transformations become effective through a discursive production in which the word *selfie* and the interactional practices associated to it represent a very meaningful sample.

With this in view, and going beyond the boundaries drawn by its immediate referent, *selfie* indicates a much broader reality, translated into forms of signifying and producing senses that are conditioned by a set of processes, among which we may highlight:

- The development of forms of labor and production organization that are based on the compression of time and space;
- The consolidation of a productive regime that is fueled by a constant movement of technological innovations;
- The sharp development of microelectronics, telematics, digital technology and wireless communication.
- The intensification of performance and productivity;
- The aggravation of individualism and competition.<sup>18</sup>

While it determines the rhythm of productive systems and labor management procedures, and of the time and space that are typical of economic life in these days, this set of processes redefines the levels of control that capital has over social life as a whole and, at the same time, reflects and refracts itself in the production of signs and utterances in practically all levels of activity and communication, and shows itself in a particularly clear manner in parts of the meaning of the word *selfie*, such as:

- Image obtained through high-technology electronic and digital devices;
- Immediate nature of the image-obtaining process;
- Possibility of instantaneous circulation and divulgence of the obtained image;
- Image is destined for virtual interaction processes.

The very semantemic components of *selfie* indicate, as shown above, a very suggestive homology between the characteristics of the interaction processes that the word integrates or refers to and the forms of organizing contemporary economic production, which are also based on the incessant flow of technological innovations, great speed in movements (financial, administrative, material, etc.), the instant nature of

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<sup>18</sup> Among several contributions that, dedicated to the study of contemporary society, made it possible to identify these processes, it is worth mentioning: Featherstone (1995), Harvey (2008; 2010), Jameson (1996), Lévy (1996; 1999), Oliveira (2005; 2008), Lipovetsky (2004a; 2004b) and Rubim (2000).

business and transactions of diverse types and the virtualization of spaces, environments and operations.

Very symptomatic of this correspondence between the modes of economic regulation and the references incorporated into sign production is the intensification of individualism that, clearly stamped in the surface of the word by the morpheme *self*, alludes to an organization model that reaffirms the individual's competitive performance as the basic principle of the system's operation, measuring this individual's performance by the capacity of providing himself with the goods for satisfying the requirements of the moment and participating in a web of relationships (also alluded by the meaning of the word) distinguishable for the hypertrophy of the "I" and the transformation of personal events into spectacles, that pervade the interaction processes in virtual platforms and in networks, where *selfies* and other correlated signs move around frantically.

One of the fundamental aspects shown by these correspondences is that, in the contemporary society, the space-time paradigms, the reasoning patterns and the models for action and representation that are peculiar to the type of rationality that has been implanted into the world of economic production, have spread out into the most diverse dimensions of social life in such a way that they determine (in some aspects, to its image and likeness) the esthetic and cognitive references, the ways of thinking and the forms of consciousness, that are consolidated by the meanings and senses that are established and that circulate in utterances produced in different ideological spheres.

Thus embedded in the sign and utterance production, speed, fluidity, contingency, fragmentation, instantaneusness and the demand for performance and productivity (characteristics of economic logic) become 'natural' information of existence and consecrate the undervaluing of behavior and thought that are not subordinated to productive, competitive or performative ends. Expressions of this tendency may be recognized in both daily life and in established ideological spheres (art, religion, law, media, science, etc.), where meanings, practices and values pervade, consolidating an atmosphere of acceleration, anxiety, fluidity and speed, where the determining space-time reference is the *here-now*.

As many other fields, science is also fully struck by this process; this may be seen reflected and refracted in *selfie* chiefly through the technologization aspect, that, semiotically embedded in the sign's content level, alludes to the way knowledge is incorporated into contemporary life. This is mainly characterized by scientific knowledge's subordination to the production logic conducted by the imperative requisites of productivity and technological innovation.

Everything considered, it isn't surprising that discourses attached in some way to the scientific sphere, such as the scientific dissemination discourse, are important fields of reflection and refraction of this entire set of transformations.

Therefore, *selfie*'s notoriety, providing evidence of the role of the word as ideological sign and, consequently, as an index for historical and social processes that are in course, points directly or indirectly to the ways the transformations in forms of organizing

production can be reflected and refracted in the sign and utterance production universe and in society's interaction processes.

## Conclusion

What I hope to have achieved in the pages above is, firstly, that, given the strong presence of the Marxist tradition as a main participant in the dialogue that the authors of the Circle (particularly Voloshinov and Medvedev) maintain with the distinct theoretical matrixes that were present in the intellectual environment of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Russia, the conception of language they elaborated carries in it a vision of ideology to which a certain understanding of the relations between society's economic organization and ideas, values, meanings and senses predominant in social life is associated. In this conception, sign-objects and concrete utterances that are produced and circulated in each sphere of activity or socio-ideological communication (religion, moral, law, media, education, science, etc.) and also in daily communication, represent territories in which, under the effect of diverse mediations, the struggles, negotiations and arrangements operated by the powers competing for economic control (it is worth saying, control over production and distribution of wealth) in society are reflected and refracted.

Secondly, following the suggestions offered by this conception in regard to the role played by the word (understood as a sign full of meanings and historically situated), I also hope to have shown that the word *selfie*, endowed with great importance in the interaction processes of contemporary society, can be seen as an extremely representative sign of the way how elements of language relate to forms of organizing production and socio-economic reality in this society, or, in Voloshinov's words, of the way the being reflects and refracts in the sign.

As regards the way how these reflections and refractions project themselves in the sign, it is worth stressing that the interpretation held here is that this happens in such a manner that the senses, perceptions and values to which the word *selfie* is usually associated with (speed, high-technology, instantaneity, the I as protagonist, fluidity, flexibility, etc.) are covered by a positive appreciation of value, the same way they are at the production organization level. The ingredient with a negative changing power, in this case, is the concealment of the struggles implied in the construction of these senses and, consequently, the erasing of the fact that appreciations contrary to these were subjugated, beaten and silenced. The celebration of the victorious meanings amplifies, therefore, the control of the also victorious powers at the level of productive organization and productive relations.

In other words, capital's logic, that, by reorganizing itself, invents and leads to victory new forms of self-valuing, expansion and exploitation of labor, also wins the fight for meanings, stamping an appearance of stability, harmony and unity to historical processes riddled by struggles, victories and defeats.

Consequently, if anything similar to a science of ideologies is still justifiable, one of the goals of such a project could be to try and connect theory to a methodology capable of contributing decisively in making these concealments visible and the silenced voices loud and clear.

ROSALVO, L. Ideologia, forças produtivas e processos de significação: a palavra *selfie* como signo ideológico. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v.61, n.1, p.33-51, 2017.

- *RESUMO: Assumindo o pressuposto de que as bases da teoria linguística do Círculo de Bakhtin (resultante da conjugação dos trabalhos de Volóchinov, Medviédév e Bakhtin) constroem-se em diálogo com tradições teóricas entre as quais o marxismo ocupa papel importante, o presente artigo discute aspectos sobre o modo como a compreensão desse grupo acerca do estatuto das relações entre infraestrutura e superestruturas e articula com a concepção de signo ideológico. A partir daí, apoiado nas noções de reflexo e refração, focaliza a palavra selfie com o intuito de analisá-la na condição de signo em que se condensam ideias, sentidos e valores associados a processos de reorganização das forças produtivas na contemporaneidade e, nessa linha de raciocínio, propõe a conclusão de que esse vocábulo, ao ilustrar exemplarmente proposições do Círculo a respeito dos nexos entre a existência socioeconômica e a consciência social, pode ser visto como um território sógnico no qual se refletem e se refratam traços fundamentais da sociedade atual.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ideologia. Discurso. Círculo de Bakhtin. Signo ideológico. Infraestrutura. Superestrutura.*

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