

**Navigating Maps:  
Review and personal commentary on Ron Scollon's (2003)  
*The Dialogist in a Positivist World***

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When Ron Scollon retired from Georgetown University at the end of the fall term of 2005, we then-students seized this rather gloomy occasion to express our heartfelt gratitude to him for his long years of teaching and guidance, by means of a very personal present: a collection of individual notes and cards assembled on a length of string which, according to the originators of this idea and in reference to Ron's most recent work, symbolized a 'nexus' of farewells and thank-you's. In my own note to him, I remember thanking Ron 'for not only helping me think outside the box, but for showing me how to take the box apart, consider its shape and content, and then ask who put the box there in the first place and why.' To this day, I treasure the influence his teachings have had on my analytical thinking, in terms of not taking things (like objects, people, actions, and the way we talk about them) for granted or for what they seem at first glance, but to inquire into their roles and provenance, including, notably, all the visible and invisible 'discourses' cycling through. (Ron's methodology regarding how to do this is of course well documented in his books and articles, some of which are reviewed in this very eVox tribute issue.)

For me as a student, becoming 'socialized' in such de-construction of my surroundings was at first an awesome and slightly unsettling experience, which left me with the obvious, big questions – *is everything* around us, including all my knowledge about the world, 'relative,' socially constructed, a figment of my socio-culturally shaped, educated, habituated, and manipulated mind?

Here is where Ron's article on 'The Dialogist in a Positivist World' (2003) came to my rescue, laying out the field of tension between positivist and constructivist perspectives on science (and the world in general) in such a thoughtful, succinct, and utterly comprehensible way, while also indicating ideas on how to reconcile oneself with both perspectives, that I've become guilty of considering it (and recommending it to people) as a manifesto of post-postmodernist sociolinguistic inquiry (a fact Ron would certainly have had interesting comments on).

In this article, Ron Scollon elucidates the relationship between what he calls the 'dialogist or constructionist' and the 'hypothetico-deductive' perspectives on human knowledge and science. The latter can be considered the 'classical' view, which comprises as key aspects "an epistemology that asserts that knowledge consists of the truth testing of statements through a set of agreed rules of discursive procedure and an ontology that asserts that knowledge is 'about' something that is itself outside of the discursive system of hypothetico-deductive procedures" (p.75). In other words, the hypothetico-deductive perspective on knowledge and science is

fundamentally realist in its assertion that there is a world that is independent of our discourses about it, and rationalist in its assertion that through following rules of procedure in our discourses about the world we can come to know it in a way that is both reliable and valid; reliable in the sense that repeated attempts to know it will discover the same world if and when rules are followed, and valid in the sense that what is said corresponds in a regular and predictable way to an extra-discursive world. (75)

By contrast, a dialogist or constructionist perspective on human knowledge and science assumes that "any statements made, including scientific hypotheses, carry with them the specific positions and histories of the languages in which they are made", so that a formal detachment of a statement from the socio-cultural conditions under which it was made "is a theoretical impossibility, not just a methodological difficulty" (76). (Here, 'languages' should be broadly conceived to include the "highly formalized languages of mathematics and science".) From such a perspective, "there is an ontology – more often pre-supposed than argued – that asserts discourse as primary. That is, dialogical theory takes a semiotized world as primary, and all other worlds as discursively derived" (76). It follows that knowledge is seen as discursively constructed, and that it is furthermore open to discussion "whether or not there is anything that can be known outside of these discourses" (77). The task of theorizing, then, consists of deconstructing knowledge discourses (i.e. finding and clarifying their historical and socio-cultural antecedents that are taken for granted) and then recontextualizing them (i.e. repositioning the discourses under study in their socio-cultural context, which includes the position of the researcher) – (76).

After laying out these two seemingly opposing poles within human ontology (study of the nature of existence) and epistemology (study of knowledge), Ron Scollon turns to the 'critical realism' of Roy Bhaskar (e.g. 1989) for an attempt at reconciliation. Bhaskar argues that we must accept that there is indeed a world that exists independently of descriptions of it; but, in turn, our knowledge of this world is inevitably discursively produced: "That is to say, in a few words, that critical realism takes the position of a realist ontology coupled with a constructivist epistemology" (Scollon 2003:78). This is also captured in Korzybski's succinct aphorism 'The map is not the territory' (1931[1994]). A radical constructivist position would hold that "the territory is nothing but the map; change the map and you have changed the territory"; while the extreme positivist position would be that "there is nothing you can do in manipulating your map that ultimately will affect the territory it maps" (Scollon 2003:78).

Borrowing from Bhaskar and Korzybski, then, Ron Scollon argues that as humans, we have constructed a rather large number of " 'human epistemological constructs' (HECs) – maps for short" such as "languages, mathematical characterizations, photographs, road maps, cultures, semiotic codes". In describing the relationship between these constructs and the territory they are proposing to map (i.e. the 'real world'), it is, however, "impossible to take either a radical positivist or a radical constructivist position". Rather, "the realist world and our human epistemological constructs have a dialogical or dialectical relationship to each other – that is, the world exerts pressure on what we can say about it and at the same time our constructs can bring about changes in reality" (78-79). In the article, this is illustrated with the example of John Mandeville's travel writings, which were used by Columbus for guidance on his journey across the sea. Mandeville's map (which appears downright crude and false from today's perspective) didn't change the world simply by being drawn. However, on the other hand, the existence and use of the map did indeed bring about changes in human epistemological constructs (introducing notions like 'the West' or 'Indians'), which, long-term, brought about changes in the material and real world.

Ron Scollon then goes on to argue that, as human languages, culture, and scientific descriptions can all be seen as HECs or 'maps' (see above), "our analyses in the social sciences and in the humanities are not at all maps of the world in any direct sense, but, in fact, they are maps of maps, human epistemological constructs *about* or *of* other human epistemological constructs, not about 'the world' in any direct sense" (79). In short, human sciences are secondary "*ways of knowing ways of knowing the world*" (80), unlike, perhaps, more physiological or material sciences. As such, human sciences would in fact want to take a constructivist perspective, which can actually, by means of a positioned and self-reflective philosophy, provide the tools to 'log on' to human perception and experience of 'reality'. At

the same time, however, it still seems necessary to grant some room at least to the possibility of 'certainty', as a "fundamental prerequisite for taking meaningful social action", or, put simply, for changing this 'reality'. In other words, influencing human 'ways of knowing the world', which may be the ultimate interest of at least some social scientists, is only meaningful if we admit the (positivist) possibility of real-world outcomes and effects.

Thus, an integrated perspective seems warranted in the social sciences, drawing on *both* positivist and constructivist views of human ontology and epistemology, while making sure to keep up a true dialogue with the members of the particular communities of practice being studied and their experiences and concerns. I, for one, have been utterly convinced. It is to Ron Scollon's great and lasting credit that he not only laid out the argument, as in the article I have just summarized, but that he also time and again showed us students how to follow through on it. He will continue to do so as his words and teachings echo in our minds and resonate with the large readership of his books and articles around the world.

#### References

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