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## **DIALOGICAL SELF AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS: LOOKING FOR AMBIVALENCES**

### **ABSTRACT**

According to Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 1996), the self is like a vocal society, i.e., it is populated by a community of I-positions or voices that are entitled to have an opinion and promote active discussions in order to make their viewpoint prevail. Having in mind the purpose of studying and deepening the interactions between these voices, a semi-structured interview was developed as an attempt to “give voice” to this multivocal assembly. In this interview, participants are invited to consider the significant dimensions they identify in their selves as characters and to narrate the possible dialogues between them – Dialogical Articulation Task, DAT (Duarte, Rosa & Gonçalves, 2006). Assuming that the relationship with a partner is one of the most central aspects in our relational life, we are interested in exploring the impact on the Dialogical Self of the changes that occur in couples throughout their relationship’s development (McGoldrick & Carter, 1982; Relvas, 1996). Two case studies are presented to illustrate the emergence of ambivalences and its regulation into self dynamics in the dialogues between the internal position that represents the couple’s relationship – termed by the participants “I as a Relational” – and the remaining I-positions of the self-system.

**Key words:** dialogical self; multivocality; close relationships; couple’s life cycle; semiotic mediation, ambivalence

“(...) inside me I’m not alone. I am many.  
 Moreover, all of them dispute my single life. (...)  
 Therefore, when I tell my story I blend myself,  
 Mulatto not of races, but of existences.”  
 (Mia Couto, Mozambican writer)

According to a systemic perspective, the couple, as a central subsystem of the family system, undergoes a development process that involves “the active acquisition (of new) and rejection of (old) roles by its elements, while they adjust themselves to recurring pressures of life” (Hill & Mattessich, 1979, in: Relvas, 1996, p. 15, parenthesis added). At the basis of the formation of couple’s subsystem one finds the structure of new interaction patterns which are obtained through the negotiation and setting up of rules that integrate the rules inherited from each family of origin as well as the expectations and values of each partner (Minuchin, 1979). These interaction patterns are continuously negotiated, although major revisions tend only to occur in moments marked by tension (e.g., expected developmental transitions, sudden and unexpected changes). The content of this tension is mainly related to “the areas of redefinition of limits or boundaries of the subsystem: between the individuals, with the families of origin and, later, with the children, friends and the professional world; at last, with a whole group of significant contexts (...) which can be defined, in a word, as ‘the third’” (Relvas, 1996, p. 59, italics added). Thus, the life of the couple goes on in a stage also dominated by other persons and relationships, and the way the couple manages this world of the “third” is vital for the couple’s survival and development. In this vein, the following article takes a closer look at the movements of the position that represents the couple’s internal I-position, termed by some of our participants “I as a Relational”, in its effort to get along and set up limits with the remaining I-positions of the dialogical self.

### 1. DIALOGICAL SELF: A MULTIVOCAL ASSEMBLY

The Dialogical Self Theory presents itself as a model of thinking and understanding the self according to which several characters inside the self can, from their different spatial positions, set a dialogue and negotiate between them the meaning of each event. An assembly of voices is involved in the construction of our life narratives and every decision taken is the result of the dialogues that took place among a community of voices, with internal (e.g., “I as psychologist”) and external positions (e.g., “My mother in me”) represented (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans, 2001).

The diversity of contexts and relationships, the variety of experiential moments or just the uncertainty concerning the future justify the latent instability of the dialogical self. In this way, the countless possible ways of reformulating the identity positions’ repertoire can be compared to a play in several acts. In each act, the contexts, motivations, feelings, cultural aspects, and other significant elements will determine which identity position is taking the leading role, while the remaining voices are temporarily located in the background. This instability may

be compensated by those parts of the self, which are “inhabited” by more stable positions that keep the continuity of the system (see Hermans, 2003) – we think that the “I as a Relational” I-position may “inhabit” that domain.

This dynamic picture of the self can make us wonder how identity positions, so dynamically changeable, are integrated in a manner that allows continuity. Looking at the semiotic processes of meaning-making that occur in the dialogical self seems to be the way to solve this problem, by emphasizing how human beings construct superstructures mediated by signs to regulate the fluidity of the dynamics between I-positions. Thus, one may conceive of the dialogical self as a semiotically self-regulated system (Hermans, 1996; Valsiner, 2004a, 2005).

## 2. SEMIOTIC MEDIATION AND AMBIVALENCE: STABILITY AND CHANGE

Human experiential flow, which results from the incessant exchanges with the environment, proceeds in parallel with the irreversible time. Human needs for prediction and control of the future outcomes are defied by the constant inherent uncertainty of being (Valsiner, 2004b). Hermans and Dimaggio (2007) consider this uncertainty as an intrinsic feature of a dialogical self since it “is involved in internal and external interchanges and never reaches a final destination. This self is conceived of as open to an ambiguous other and is in flux toward a future that is largely unknown. (...) this uncertainty challenges our potential for innovation and creativity to the utmost and, at the same time, it entails the risks of a defensive and monological closure of the self and the unjustified dominance of some voices over others.” (p. 10). Human being’s efforts to reduce this uncertainty involve the elaboration of signs – stabilizing semiotic devices – that prepare them for the next encounter with the immediate future. In other words, the semiotic mediation illustrates that one of the bases of human reasoning is the effort to achieve monological representations of the world (Valsiner, 2002b). In this way, the experiential diversity gives rise to an increasing number of abstract meanings, organized into a hierarchical structure where each higher level of signs regulates the functioning of the lower levels. According to a dialogical perspective of the meaning-making process, the creation of these hierarchical controlling structures through semiotic mediation is impelled by the dialogical relations within the self (Valsiner, 2002a). In this sense, the multivocal nature of the dialogical self, allowing for a multiplicity of possible dialogues among the various I-positions, is a powerful catalytic process of the meaning-making activity.

In their dialectic perspective, Valsiner and collaborators (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998; Josephs, Valsiner & Sorgan, 1999; Valsiner, 2005) conceptualize the process of meaning-making in terms of dualities and state that meanings emerge as bipolar meaning complexes which they define as “signs (meanings per se) that present some aspects of the world, their implied opposites, and qualifiers that are linked with either signs or their opposites” (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998, p. 70). According to this approach each meaning that is constructed (A, and for purposes of illustration let A be “dialogue”), re-constructs immediately its opposite (Non-A, “non-dialogue”), that is, two mutually related fields (A vs. non-A) are constructed which in their turn, become a meaning complex that is differentiated and foregrounded against

the remaining universe of possibilities (not-A, “not-dialogue”) (see Josephs, Valsiner & Surgan, 1999, for a more detailed elaboration). The field Non-A is a field characterized by its intentional indeterminacy and consists of all possible transformations of A. Therefore, it represents the part of the dual system where the largest transformation of the meaning can occur (Josephs, Valsiner & Surgan, 1999), pointing to the future possibilities that Non-A can take. To deepen our understanding of the meaning-construction processes that take place in the self, the essential question has to be asked concerning the rules that allow an initial position (A vs. Non-A) to be transformed in to other forms.

According to Josephs and Valsiner (1998) there are two types of oppositional relations between the two meaning fields (A and non-A) of a complex. The opposites can coexist without tension, closing the meaning complex to further transformation or they can be involved in a tensional opposition leading the meaning complex to enter in a dialogical relation with other complexes. These relations between different meaning complexes may be harmonious (as in “the dialogue between ‘I as a Relational’ and ‘I as a Mother’: at times they agree, and at times they have opposed opinions”) or they may involve a rivalry (for instance, “the dialogue between ‘I as a Relational’ and ‘I as a Mother’: at times they agree, and at times they have opposed opinions, but...”). The escalating of this rivalry can lead to the taking over of one meaning complex by the other (“but, in fact, most of the time they have opposed opinions”). These dialogical exchanges are often organized by the use of circumvention strategies – “semiotic means within a process of dialogic meaning-making which can modify the relation between meaning complexes” (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998, p. 73). These semiotic strategies can conciliate otherwise contradictory meaning complexes (“‘I as a Daughter’ and ‘I as a Relational’ don’t share anything, but they will have to be a little more flexible because this is not the ideal I have imagined”). In this case, the focus on personal preference, which is a circumvention strategy, enables the coexistence of non-dialogue and flexibility. Of course, the escalating of rivalry and the take-over of one complex by the other can also occur (“between ‘I as a Daughter’ and ‘I as a Relational’ there was a truth dialogue” – the semantic qualifier “truth” sustains the dominance of dialogue over monologue).

Each meaning has an element of certainty, i.e. the part of the meaning that “is right” for the present moment. However, given the irreversibility of human life-time the present moment is so infinitely small that a person hardly has time to estimate the rightness or wrongness of the meaning in action. According to Abbey and Valsiner “the process of semiotic emergence is driven by the ambivalence between these two elements, between what one got right, and what one got wrong (but now knows) that will in turn be part of the next emerging meaning.” (2004, paragraph 17). In the process, always unfinished, of negotiation within and between meaning complexes, each new contextualization of meaning evokes a state of ambivalence. Thus, more or less intensive levels of ambivalence feed a never-ending process of meaning-making and emergence of signs in the self. However, there are also moments marked by the absence of ambivalence: a) when there is no confrontation between different perspectives (“there is no dialogue, it is only ‘I as a Relational’

that is present”); b) when the presence of an over-emphasizing uncertainty (“I don’t know if they dialogue”) reduces the ambivalence and the sign disappears from the context (loss of the sign and therefore lack of ambivalence) or c) when there are synthesized momentarily stable signs that narrow the usually open field of possible futures to a specified meaning (“they don’t dialogue, because they are independent”). In such moments, the development of the meaning-making process stops, because the field of the future was previously limited to a well-defined option. Only when the uncertainty is reintroduced will the process of meaning construction be activated to produce a new meaning (See for more details Abbey & Valsiner, 2004). In this sense, the impact of ambivalence in the meaning-making process is interestingly functional: on the one hand, if an elaborated meaning has a high level of certainty, we manage to reduce ambivalence; on the other hand, if it doesn’t, the ambivalence is maintained, leading us to restart the search for a new meaning in the open field of possibilities.

In terms of dialogical self this ambivalence can be revealed in the tension between constantly moving structural oppositions of I-positions that fluctuate in their dialogical relationships as they move along the strip (Valsiner, 2006). In our view one way of looking at these phenomena is to differentiate among the types of interaction (process) between voices (internal or external) and the corresponding output. There are two prototypical forms of interaction that can be conceived of in a continuum: monologue and dialogue. As we will argue below, this does not equate linearly with the monological and dialogical, which refer in our view to the result of the interaction. In monologues, only one voice is heard, while in dialogues several are heard, although they may differ in power and capability of domination (see Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). On the other hand, the result may vary along a continuum between the monological (an attempt to refuse the dialogical nature of existence and communication, see Linell & Marková, 1993) and dialogical (acceptance and even celebration of the difference). The combination of these two elements (type and result of the interaction) creates in our opinion four main forms of intrapersonal interaction.

- A) Isolated monologue: there is only one voice that denies the existence of other voices. One interesting parallel borrowed from the family and couple’s therapy tradition is what Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson (1967) designate as disconfirmation: the other is denied as a different person. One example could be the mother that does not accept the angry tone of her daughter and says “you are only saying that because you are sick” (see Watzlawick, Bavelas & Jackson, 1967). The underlying message is “you do not exist as an individual or I know better than you what you feel”.
- B) Intentional monologue: this refers to situations when one position, although aware of others, refuses to enter communication. Following what Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson (1967) proposed a long time ago – we can say that not communicating is a form of communication. We believe that this is also valid for internalized conversations. In this second type of monologue, the position “in talk” does not deny the other, but refuses to take into account the other’s perspective. Comparison with the visual system may

be valuable here: when a specific situation justifies the intensive activation of an I-position, we might feel the need to stay focused on that position and we only take under consideration what is said by it. This monologue presupposes a dominant speech of an I-position, while the others are still in the background and that's the reason why it is clearly distinct from the persistent elimination of others' perspectives (or monologicality). In couple's relationships something like this occurs when one partner imagines that the other's opinion about a given subject is very different and does not allow any dialogue to take place, protecting his or her perspective from the intrusion of the other. In terms of communication this does not mean "you don't exist" as in the first type of monologue, but simply "I don't even want to listen to you, I need to secure my view and not to get confused by other perspectives".

- C) Authoritarian dialogue: the different positions are in dialogue, but the type of interaction is very asymmetrical. While the dominant position is "one-up" (see Watzlawick, Bavelas & Jackson, 1967) there is little probability that change can happen, because this position asserts that its own perspective is the correct one. Levinas (1969, in: Cooper, 2004) calls this an attempt to totalize the interchange. The non-dominant positions for most of the time are actors of the plot narrated by the dominant voice, which adopts the author's character. This type of dialogue happens in a couple when one of the partners says "I heard what you said or I know what you think about it, but I'm the one who knows what's best for both of us".
- D) Cooperative dialogue: This is the prototype of a real dialogue; one voice speaks while the other listens. Somehow the dialogical nature of communication is accepted and creates the possibility for different meaning to emerge from the combination of diverse perspectives. Each voice is, in a sense, a co-author of the other, and we can really have a joint production here (see Shotter, 1999). In couple's life this occurs when both partners co-construct meanings and negotiate solutions for their problems, innovating their individual position.

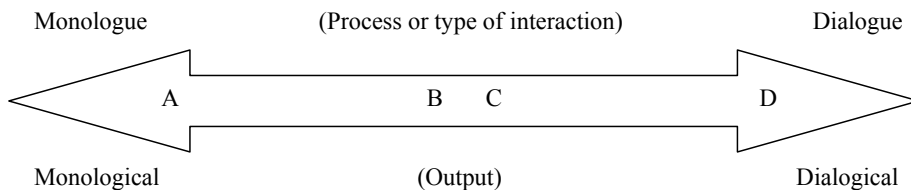


Figure 1. Articulation between the process and the output of the interaction

Table 1. Integrating synthesis with research and couple's life examples

<b>Type of interaction between voices</b>				
	<b>Isolated Monologue</b>	<b>Intentional Monologue</b>	<b>Authoritarian Dialogue</b>	<b>Cooperative Dialogue</b>
<b>Research examples</b>	“‘I as a Daughter’ and ‘I as a Relational’, they do not really meet each other. (...) they are perfect strangers”	“‘I as a Relational’ needed to have time for itself; (...) need moments like this”	“‘I as a Mother’, I think it always spoke louder; While the ‘I as a Daughter’ increases the ‘I as a Relational’ decreases”	“Everything is coming together. The ‘I as Relational’ wTas amazing (...) affecting the ‘I as a Mother’, as well”
<b>Couple's life examples</b>	Disconfirmation	Attempt to refuse dialogue	One-up	Functional Balancing
	<b>Monological</b> (attempt to refuse the dialogical nature of interaction)		<b>Dialogical</b> (acceptance and even celebration of the dialogical nature)	

**Output of the interaction**

During the couple's life cycle people enter different social role relationships (for example, “I as a Daughter”, “I as a Relational”, “I as a Mother”). Each one of these roles, or I-positions, has its own features and rules by which it operates and relates to the remaining I-positions of the self-system. A small life event can introduce modifications into these patterns, however in some expected moments along the way (the couple's formation; child's birth; the empty nest) these rules have to necessarily be changed. These moments are often characterized by the integration of new I-positions and reformulation of the existing ones, bringing in novelty and risk to the core of the dialogical self. Departing from the assumption that these normative changes of the couple's life cycle trigger interesting dialogical re-accommodation procedures, we studied participants' processes of self-reflexive meaning-making while describing the internal dynamics of their self-system.

**3. THE SAMPLE**

Our sample contains 9 couples that are on different stages of the couple's life cycle: 3 couples without children; 3 couples with babies or children at the school age and 3 couples with adult children (according to systemic perspective of the Family Vital Cycle, Nichols, 1984; Relvas, 1996). As this study is still in a phase of data analysis, in this paper we will explore only some preliminary results inferred from the first analysis of two cases, trying to highlight the emergence of ambivalences and their regulation into the self dynamics in the dialogues engendering the position “I as a Relational”.



### 3.1. DAT: SEMIOTIC ARENA FOR THE OBSERVATION OF DIALOGICAL EXCHANGES

We have developed, in an exploratory study, a semi-structured interview that invites participants to identify the multivocality of their identity and exteriorize the dialogues between I-positions – Dialogical Articulation Task, DAT (for more details, see Duarte, Rosa & Gonçalves, 2006). The participant is invited to imagine that different elements of his/her self are like a character in a story or movie, which suddenly gets an independent voice. These voices are conceptualized as I-positions, and the person is asked to perform the exercise of alternately moving between each of the positions and stimulate dialogues among them. There is a set of questions that we ask the participants in order to clarify (1) the presence of dialogues or monologues; (2) the usual agreement or disagreement between the I-positions, (3) their ability to negotiate and synthesise shared meanings, (4) the eventual dominance and the kind of power exerted by some of the I-positions, and (5) the affective impact of the interaction conclusion.

The awareness that a single picture of the self system or a single moment of data collection would be insufficient to illustrate these dynamics has influenced the investigation's procedure. The present protocol, even though it does not allow to produce of a "film", makes possible the presentation of a sequence of flashes or key moments. Thus, the process of data collection occurred weekly, during a month and a half and it had three phases: a) first application of DAT (identification of the identity positions and exploration of the dialogues between them); b) 4 weekly applications (exploration of the dialogues between the identity positions defined in the first interview based upon the most significant event of the week), and c) last application of DAT (redefinition of the identity positions and last exploration of the more frequent dialogues between them). It is important to clarify that what we understand by identity positions are the discursive positions that in that precise space-time moment came out as the most significant or "activated" for the participant. By nature of the task, implicit positions could be much more difficult to access and become the target of the participants' elaboration. Thus, these discursive I-positions constitute the way participants define their own self at the moment of the interview.

## 4. THE ANALYSIS: THE PROCESS OF MEANING-MAKING SEEN THROUGH A MAGNIFYING GLASS

The goal of systematic observation of the way participants construct meanings and semiotically organize them to manage the constant redefinitions of the dialogical relations between I-positions clearly fits the level of "microgenesis" (Diriwächter & Valsiner, 2006). The microgenetic method involves the investigation of the progress of a form of a given phenomenon and its transformation into another form. For example, a microgenetic study of the transition between the forms A-B-C does not see this progress as a simple occurrence of separated forms, but it cares about the progress between A-B and B-C focusing on the intermediate forms that can be observed in the transition moments ( $A \rightarrow ab \rightarrow B$  and  $B \rightarrow bc \rightarrow C$ ) (Abbey & Valsiner, 2004). The temporal sequence of observations involved in a microgenetic

method allows to follow the development of the phenomenon closely throughout time, having as a goal to approach the processes that sustain the quantitative and qualitative aspects of development and change (Siegler & Crowley, 1991).

From the integral transcription of the interviews, we have selected all the dialogues established between “I as a Relational” and the remaining I-positions, as our unit of analysis. We understand that these dialogues represent the participant’s attempts to make sense of the involved dialogical relations and they allow just to catch a glimpse of the oscillations that are going on, momentarily, in the dynamic structure of the self system. In this article, we will just focus on the analysis of the dialogues marked by ambivalence because, as it is an important source of creativity catalyzing the process of meaning construction, it enables the observation of interesting movements of restructuring.

#### 4.1. PARTICIPANT 1: “DO I REALLY HAVE TO STOP BEING A DAUGHTER TO BE A WOMAN?”

P1 is a 25-year-old young psychologist and she is just starting her career. She has been living with her mate for a year and a half. Their relationship has been kept in secret from the families of origin – an assumed and shared decision that has been responsible for some stressful situations. In the first interview, the participant defines the identity positions repertoire as being represented by the following positions: “I as a Friend”, “I as a Daughter”, “I as a Professional”, and “I as a Relational”. A month and a half later, and after 4 weekly meetings to think about the dynamics between these I-positions, the participant decides to reformulate her self-system, keeping the initial four positions and adding the identity position “I as an Organizer”. This is described as “a position that lives in a standby; I imagine it deep inside, very far away from the daily practical things, right in the middle of all other positions. Its action is not caused by outside realities, but by other positions’ realities. It was the first position ever to be formed and all the others have differed from it. Therefore, it is just like an old wise man that we look for in times of need and who is only called to sort important things out”. This position seems to represent what in literature is described as a meta-position or central I-position that is capable of communicating openly and effectively with other identity positions, having a function of management or coordination (Cooper, 2003; Dimaggio, Salvatore, Azzara & Catania, 2003; Hermans, 2003; Leiman & Stiles, 2001).

Two I-positions seem to occupy the position of the organizer in two different moments of time: “I as a Daughter” and “I as Relational”. Until recently, “I as a Daughter” was central in the participant’s self-system, and she describes this dimension of her self as one in which she felt confident, without fearing any judgement by her interlocutors (parents) on the features that she considers less positive in herself. In the present time, the participant faces, with worry and preoccupation, the need to change this position. This need has been enhanced by the fact that the “I as Relational” is now the most activated I-position and is a dimension in which she feels very comfortable. The relevance and power

underlying these two I-positions create the expectation that the encounter between them will be marked by tension and ambivalence.

Next, we will present the analysis of the process of meaning construction initiated by the participant when the researcher invites her to describe the possible encounters between these two I-positions.

1<sup>st</sup> Interview – Dialogue between “I as a Daughter” and “I as a Relational”

”[Researcher: Do ‘I as a Daughter’ and ‘I as Relational’ talk to each other?] These do not really meet each other. (...) these two positions hardly know each other, they do not have any references of one another, they do not know where each one is, and they are perfect strangers. [R: And does this dialogue have any affective impact?] Yes, a concern because it is not the ideal I imagined.”

**Analysis:** The researcher proposes the meaning-complex DIALOGUE vs. NON-DIALOGUE (A vs. NON-A) and the participant rejects the meaning field DIALOGUE (A) and elaborates the field NON-DIALOGUE (NON-A) with the synthesis of the meaning – Alienation (“they are perfect strangers”). The tension inside the DIALOGUE vs. NON-DIALOGUE meaning-complex is sustained by the construction of two circumvention strategies – the semantic qualifier “hardly” and the focus on a personal preference “it is not the ideal I imagined”. However, the meaning in action impersonates the existing inability and fear of stimulating an encounter of the I-positions. If ambivalence and uncertainty aren’t introduced in the meaning-making process this condition may last forever.

Week 1 – Dialogue between “I as a Daughter” and “I as a Relational”

”Once again, they do things autonomously and separately, without crossing each other too much. But if they had crossed, in case there had been a dialogue, I think that ‘I as a Relational’ would teach something to ‘I as a Daughter’, i.e., to be more careful, be more present, be more tender.”

**Analysis:** Once more there is a constructive elaboration of the field NON-DIALOGUE, based upon the construction of a new meaning-complex – INDEPENDENCE vs. NON-INDEPENDENCE (B vs. NON-B, “they do things autonomously and separately”). However, the “too much” semantic qualifier maintains some tension between the meaning fields DIALOGUE vs. NON-DIALOGUE and the new meaning-complex introduces ambivalence. As the result of these changes, the participant creates an imaginary situation of acceptance of the field DIALOGUE sustained by the emergence of meaning – Learning (“‘I as a Relational’ would teach something to ‘I as a Daughter’”). This hypothetical situation brings novelty to the meaning-making process and might be an important step towards a reformulation of these I-positions interaction.

Week 2 – “I as a Daughter” and “I as a Relational”

”...they might have had a small dialogue. (...) Therefore, while one increases the other decreases and they have a very balanced relationship, i.e., when one weighs more the other weighs less.”

**Analysis:** The semantic qualifier “small” reveals that the tension inside the DIALOGUE vs. NON-DIALOGUE meaning-complex is still present. However,

in this excerpt the imaginary growth of DIALOGUE (A) of the previous example has the opportunity to become real. The participant's elaboration of new meaning to manage this dialogue - Power Balance ("while one increases the other decreases and they have a very balanced relationship"), results in ambivalence decrease.

Week 3 – "I as a Daughter" and "I as a Relational"

"I think this was the truth dialogue. I felt that my impulsive and negative reaction in that situation and the fact that I was not worried with my partner's feelings, comes from 'I as a Daughter', from the confidence that I have in that position allowing me not to be worried about what the other person will think or feel. But, the motivation to redress the error with a special dinner has something to do with the 'I as a Daughter' too, and with the ability that I had been learning of recognizing the errors. I think the 'I as a Relational' felt the good and bad side of the 'I as a Daughter'."

**Analysis:** In this example, the participant renovates the growth of DIALOGUE, sustained by the meaning – Unidirectional Interference ("I think the 'I as a Relational' felt the good and bad side of the 'I as a Daughter'"). The qualifier "truth" reinforces the DIALOGUE field and there is a temporary elimination of the tension inside the DIALOGUE vs. NON-DIALOGUE complex. In this sense, the meaning in action artificially reduces the ambivalence and temporary blocks further elaboration of this meaning-complex.

Week 4 – "I as a Daughter" and "I as a Relational"

"I think what caused more discomfort was the similarity between the 'I as a Daughter' and 'I as a Relational's opinions about the best way to spent the Sunday afternoon. They are not used to getting along and having a dialogue and maybe there has been a dialogue. They felt strange about their agreement for the option of doing nothing, of taking a rest, while other positions had different opinions. This agreement brought in some tension between them because it is a novelty, it is very different from what they are used to."

**Analysis:** The participant keeps the dialogical interaction between the I-positions in the field DIALOGUE; however, the tension between the meaning fields of the DIALOGUE vs. NON-DIALOGUE complex is reintroduced by the qualifier "maybe". On the other hand, the meaning constructed to support the dialogue – Agreement ("their agreement in the option of doing nothing, of taking a rest") is immediately contested ("caused more discomfort; they felt strangeness; some tension between them") leading of to the increase of ambivalence. In this excerpt, the participant's movement toward a DIALOGUE between these I-positions is threatened and the maintenance of this dialogical interaction demands the introduction of a different meaning.

2<sup>nd</sup> Interview – "I as a Daughter" and "I as a Relational"

"I said I thought they did not have any relationship, they did not share anything, but after all they do and they share the bad things of 'I as a Daughter'. It is not free from tension, on the contrary, the 'I as a Relational' understood

what was happening and did not like it and will try to keep what was the initial thought and wish of sharing nothing. ‘I as a Relational’ does not want invasions or any kind of talk. (...) I think ‘I as a Daughter’ was not prepared to socialize with ‘I as a Relational’ and is happy that ‘I as a Relational’ arranges things this way.(...) I think that as time goes by they will have to be a little more flexible and then not only bad things will go on between them, but also good ones.’

**Analysis:** In the last example, the interaction between the I-positions is initially kept in the field DIALOGUE, which is maintained by a new meaning that the participant understands as being the summary of the global interaction analysis – Negative Contamination (“they share the bad things of ‘I as a Daughter’”). This meaning sets ambivalence at a moderate level “not free from tension” and the participant undertakes a new enlargement of the DIALOGUE field by elaborating the ASYMMETRY vs. NON-ASYMMETRY meaning complex. The ASYMMETRY field enlargement is supported by the meaning – Independence (“the ‘I as a Relational’ (...) will try to keep what was the initial thought and wish of sharing nothing”). In its first use (week 1), this meaning was shared by the two I-positions to justify the non-dialogue between them. In this case, this meaning supports a different dialogical interaction, it arises out of the dialogue between the I-positions, in which “I as a Relational” imposes the meaning and “I as a Daughter” accepts it. In both examples, this meaning is the promoter of the projective construction of meanings that would guarantee greater dialogicality to the self-system (the imaginary situation of week 1 and the projection into the future of the present example are novelty moments in the meaning-making process). When the participant projects this relationship into the future, an embryonic meaning emerges that might be able to establish a functional dialogue between these I-positions – Redefinition of Limits (“they will have to be a little more flexible and then not only bad things will go on between them, but also good ones”).

#### 4.2. PARTICIPANT 2: “BEING A MOTHER IS SO ABSORBING, HAVE I FORGOTTEN TO BE A WOMAN?”

P2 is a 31-year-old woman and works in a hospital as a pharmacist. She has been married for 3 and half years, but she has been living with her husband for about six years. They have a 22-month-old daughter who, as soon as she was born, became her mother’s “world centre”. In the first moment of defining her I-positions, the participant identifies “I as a Professional”, “I as a Mother”, “I as a Relational” and “I as a House Manager”. In her last interview, the participant brings in changes into her identity system: she excludes “I as a House Manager” and introduces “I as a Friend”. The participant explains that during her first interview, the management of domestic life was an issue of great concern; it was an aspect she was not being able to conciliate with the rest, and therefore it stood out in a negative way. During the second interview, the participant justifies the “I as a House Manager” retirement from the self-system with the following statement “I am no longer worried about the housewife work because now I can manage things very well. In this way, I can see the ‘I as a House Manager’ differently, for me it’s now a normal thing; it is no longer an independent and detached

dimension". As far as the position "I as a Friend" is concerned, it was not taken into account in the first interview because there was no room for its manifestation. The continued reflexion required by the procedure had been enhancing the need to activate this I-position that had already been so rewarding and therefore the "I as a Friend" is reintroduced in the redefinition of the self-system.

The I-positions relating to family nucleus – "I as a Mother" and "I as a Relational" – are the gravitational centre of this participant's self system. "I as a Mother" was the most recent position constructed. At the present moment, it is highly dominant, exerting a considerable power over other dimensions of the self. The participant admits that she would like to have some extreme traits of this position more balanced, like for example the obsessive need to have everything under control. At the same time, she recognizes that she has difficulties in modifying this position. The dominant tendency of this I-position makes it difficult to change anything about it, because in every dialogue with a different I-position "I as a Mother" always wins. In the past, "I as Relational" had a similar dominant capacity over other positions. The inclusion of the "I as a Mother" in the self-system triggered a tensional dominance reversal. Therefore, the actual nature of low activation and display of the "I as a Relational" is about to change and this I-position is ready to fight against "I as a Mother" in order to recover the leading role in the self system.

We will proceed with the analysis of the meaning-making process developed by P2 in her attempts to give sense to the dialogical exchange between "I as a Relational" and "I as a Mother" I-positions.

1<sup>st</sup> Interview – "I as a Relational" and "I as a Mother"

"I think 'I as a Mother' and 'I as a Relational' interact a lot! (...) I think a child, even though people say the opposite, always leads to couple's detachment. (...) From the day she was born, there was a detachment. All the attention is focused on my daughter. (...) Therefore, there was a huge break for the person who lived exclusively for the partner. (...) suddenly my child was born and I have dedicated myself exclusively to her. [R: At this moment, is there one position that invariably speaks louder than the other?] At the beginning the 'I as a Mother' talked a lot, I think it always, always spoke louder, but this isn't the right thing to do. Now, I want to try to balance both."

**Analysis:** The participant promotes the development of DIALOGUE, sustained by the meaning – Interdependence ("there was a huge break for the person who lived exclusively for the partner. (...) suddenly my child was born and I have dedicated myself exclusively to her"). The reinforcement of the semantic qualifier "a lot" eliminates the tension between DIALOGUE vs. NON-DIALOGUE, establishing the DIALOGUE field. Departing from the DIALOGUE between the I-positions, the researcher proposes a new meaning-complex ASYMMETRY vs. NON-ASYMMETRY (B vs. NON-B, "(...) is there one position that invariably speaks louder than the other?"). The participant promotes a growth of ASYMMETRY, sustained by the meaning – Exclusive Dedication ("All the attention is focused on my daughter; 'I as a Mother' (...) always spoke louder"). However, the tension inside the B vs. NON-B complex is sustained by the elaboration of two circumvention strategies: focus on an evaluative macro-organizer ("but this isn't the right thing to do") and focus on a personal preference ("I want to"). The moderate ambivalence of this interaction reinforces the motivation to look up

for a different meaning that might sustain a more symmetric relationship – Balanced Dedication (“try to balance both”).

Week 1 – “I as a Relational” and “I as a Mother”

”At this moment, ‘I as a Mother’ and ‘I as a Relational’ are the ones who establish a dialogue and interfere a lot with each other. (...) I am trying to separate them a little. Therefore, I am trying that the ‘I as a Mother’ has a role as a Mother, more attentive, relaxed, and well relaxed. In addition, I try to separate the ‘I as a Relational’, so that it can also get a more present, more dedicated role. (...) one never separates completely and it is also important for them to be together, but at least they know their place, they have to be in fact well defined and with limits.”

**Analysis:** In this excerpt we observe again the development of DIALOGUE, which is supported by a different meaning – Interference (“interfere a lot with each other”). However, the semantic qualifier “a lot” maintains the tension inside the DIALOGUE vs. NON-DIALOGUE meaning complex. Thus, the participant proceeds with a reinforcement of the DIALOGUE field through the synthesis of a new meaning-complex – INDEPENDENCE vs. NON-INDEPENDENCE (B vs. NON-B). The enlargement of the INDEPENDENCE field (“I am trying to separate them”) is readily threatened by the use of two circumvention strategies – the qualifier “little” that maintains the tension inside the B vs. NON-B meaning-complex and the focus on a personal preference (“is also important for them to be together”) that is favourable for the NON-INDEPENDENCE field. The participant’s attempts to construct a meaning that would effectively reduce ambivalence end up in a projection, under the form of an imperative “have to be in fact”, of an embryonic meaning – Redefinition of Limits (“they have to be (...) well defined and with limits”).

Week 2 – “I as a Relational” and “I as a Mother”

”We have recently bought a Jeep, and the adventure of riding in the mountains is something that my partner loves. What about me? I panic about these rides! But this weekend we shared a pleasant trip and we spent time talking about what kind of changes we are going to make in the Jeep. [R: Regarding the dialogue between ‘I as a Relational’ and ‘I as a Mother’] ‘I as a Relational’, ‘I as a Relational’. [R: It was only the ‘I as a Relational’] Yes, yes, yes, it was only that one because ‘I as a Relational’ needed to have time for itself.”

**Analysis:** The participant constructively elaborates the NON-DIALOGUE field by the synthesis of other meaning-complex MONOLOGUE vs. NON-MONOLOGUE. There is an enlargement of the MONOLOGUE field, sustained by the meaning – Compensation (“I as a Relational needed to have time for itself”). As the “I as a Relational” I-position was being harmed and neglected in the previous dialogue between the two, the participant endorses a monologue of this I-position. The circumstantial and non-definitive nature of this dogmatic structure allows an artificial reduction of the ambivalence.

Week 3 – “I as a Relational” and “I as Mother”

”Everything is beginning again, you know, we had a wonderful date and I think it was really important for both of us. (...) Everything is coming together. The ‘I-Relational’

was amazing, I think it went very well and everything else ends up having good consequences, doesn't it? [R: Since the 'I as Relational' was ok, it ends up...] affecting the 'I as a Mother' as well, of course".

**Analysis:** In this excerpt the participant returns to the development of DIALOGUE by recovering a previously synthesized meaning-complex - ASYMMETRY vs. NON-ASYMMETRY. The meaning Interference (week 1) is reformulated in order to support the enlargement of the SYMMETRY field – Positive Interference ("everything else ends up having good consequences"). However, the ambivalence reintegration is revealed by the elaboration of the tag question "doesn't it" that articulates the need for confirmation by the listener of the options chosen in the process of negotiating the meanings.

Week 4 – "I as a Relational" and "I as a Mother"

"My mother took care of my daughter so we have almost forgotten we have a child during the weekend, marvellous! The 'I as a Relational' needs moments like this, without worries, just relaxing. The 'I as a Mother' was not active, so it was only the 'I as a Relational'."

**Analysis:** In the presence of the ambivalence's reintegration (previous example), the participant did not succeed in synthesizing a meaning that would support the dialogue between the I-positions. Thus, we witness a movement that already took place in week 2. The field NON-DIALOGUE is constructively elaborated by the synthesis of the MONOLOGUE vs. NON-MONOLOGUE meaning-complex. There is an enlargement of the MONOLOGUE field, sustained by the meaning – Compensation ("The I as a Relational needs moments like this"). The participant withdraws to a safe situation of artificially minimized ambivalence between the I-positions, to "get strength" and to be able to undertake new attempts of finding a meaning that would support the desired symmetrical dialogue.

2<sup>nd</sup> Interview – "I as a Relational" and "I as a Mother"

"Between these positions there is some noise. (...) Therefore, I will try to readjust this in the best way possible. But of course, they interact a lot, not only in a good way but also in a bad way. [R: And is there one position that invariably speaks louder than the other?] It depends on the situations, but maybe the 'I as a Mother'. The 'I as a Mother' is usually more present, but it shouldn't be like this (...) I think that the 'I as a Mother' is also helping to get to know better the 'I as a Relational'. There are always thoughts and actions that one had never had or had not know. (...) It is a new role and therefore it helps to get to know the 'I as a Relational' side much better in order to try to balance the situation."

**Analysis:** In the last interview, the participant returns to the enlargement of the DIALOGUE field. This enlargement is initially supported by a meaning, which was again and again used, and always ends up being dumped or reformulated – Interference ("they interact a lot, not only in a good way but also in a bad way"). The researcher proposes the ASYMMETRY vs. NON-ASYMMETRY meaning complex ("is there one position that invariably speaks louder than the other?") and there is the enlargement of the ASYMMETRY field sustained by the synthesis of a new meaning – Activation ("the 'I as a Mother' is usually more present"). The moralistic macro-organizer ("it



shouldn't be like this") maintains the tension inside the ASYMMETRY vs. NON-ASYMMETRY meaning-complex. The participant willingly seeks to diminish the ambivalence in order to hinder any backward movement in search of new meanings that sustain a different dialogue between the I-positions. In this way, there is an enlargement of the SYMMETRY field supported by a reformulation of the initial meaning – Enriching Interference ("the 'I as a Mother' is also helping to get to know better the 'I as a Relational'"). The two projections of these dynamics into the future involve the emergence of two meanings that might be able to establish the dialogue and symmetry between the I-positions – Redefinition of Limits ("readjust this in the best way possible") and Equilibrium ("try to balance the situation").

Table 2. Summary of the interactions between the participants' I-positions

Participant	1st Interview	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	2nd Interview
1	Isolated Monologue	Intentional Monologue	Authoritarian Dialogue	Authoritarian Dialogue	Cooperative Dialogue	Authoritarian Dialogue
2	Authoritarian Dialogue	Cooperative Dialogue	Intentional Monologue	Cooperative Dialogue	Intentional Monologue	Cooperative Dialogue

## 5. CONJUGALITY AND MULTIVOCALITY: A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP?

The two presented cases gather regularities and idiosyncrasies that seem interesting. P1 is in the first stage of the couple's life cycle – formation of the couple, whose main developing task refers to the clear definition of the marital system and to the redefinition of limits as far as the family of origin is concerned. P2 is at a different stage – the family with small children – and the required actions involve an acceptance of the parental role and the redefinition of the limits regarding the children (McGoldrick & Carter, 1982; Nichols, 1984; Nock, 1982). Therefore, in P1 the "I as a Relational" I-position is introduced in the self-system and to define itself (to delimit its time and space) it has to negotiate with the I-position that most vehemently opposes its integration – "I as a Daughter". In P2 the "I as a Relational" I-position had already conquered a place of power in the self-system and the "overwhelming" entry of the "I as a Mother" I-position demanded a "battle of titans". The presence of this confrontation between I-positions of great affective/relational power ("I as a Daughter" – "I as a Relational" and "I as a Mother" – "I as a Relational") is linked to the fact that both participants are female. "The role or function performed by each partner of the couple is impregnated with myths connected with the fact of being a woman or a man, still obeying family, cultural and personal beliefs" (Gameiro, 2007, p. 29) and therefore the participants' dilemma is

not separated from the role mostly performed by women in the Portuguese culture – emotional caretaker and relationships’ manager.

To face these “internal war” episodes, or in other words, these moments of threat to the multivocal nature of the self, the participants take different paths. In the first interview, the P1’s responsibility to rehearse an encounter between the “I as a Relational” and “I as a Daughter” is clearly assumed and she is intentionally blocking the introduction of novelty in the meaning-making process. To face the initial difficulty in putting into perspective an adaptive dialogue between these I-positions, she chooses to deny and avoid this dialogue, thus assuring that the two positions remain intact. However, during the recurrent research of the dynamics between I-positions required by DAT, P1 ends up assuming the unavoidable existence of a dialogue between these central and important I-positions. In this way, she takes the risk of exploring different meanings to manage the tension inside the DIALOGUE vs. NON-DIALOGUE meaning-complex allowing her to escape from the vicious cycle of these two meaning fields. The second interview seems to reveal the strategy adopted by the participant to reduce ambivalence and to manage the dialogical interaction between the two I-positions: she accepts the presence of a dialogue, but only an asymmetric one in which the present dominant I-position – “I as a Relational” – decides the course of the conversation. The meaning-making process developed by P2, on the other hand, was a process always open to novelty. She initially assumes the existence of a dialogue between the “I as a Mother” and the “I as a Relational”. However, the discomfort that results from this interaction, which invariably has been favoring the “I as a Mother” position, sets up a movement of change. In order to counteract this ambivalent asymmetry, P2 undertakes the test of different meanings, but she was not able to elaborate a meaning that would support a balanced dialogue. Therefore, the participant adopts a different strategy from P1: she promotes the monologue of the “I as a Relational”, the I-position that according to her was being harmed. These moments of monologue produce a functional quality for the dialogical self, because a specific I-position can function at a certain moment as an anchorage point around which the entire self system organizes itself (Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992). The compensation strategy is efficient in the reduction of the ambivalence and allows a subsequent return to the dialogue between the I-positions.

The interesting progressive nature of the results seems to suggest that DAT might be a valuable device to study and change the semiotic organizers underlying self dynamics. In the externalization process required by the task the implicit organizers that regulate the inner dynamics of the self-system are “transcribed into concrete meaningful actions (the weekly events) through its transformative contextualization” (see Valsiner, 2007, p. 215, parenthesis added). Or in other words, the sustained accomplishment of this self-reflexive task seems to introduce novelty and stimulate the capacity for self-regulation. In fact, during the last interview it is possible to note some regularity in the participants’ results: on one hand, they both centre the dynamics between the I-positions in the dialogue field; on the other hand, they undertake the test of several meanings looking for support for this dialogical interaction and they both end up proposing the redefinition of limits as a functional solution. This recurrent

need of redefinition of the limits between the “I as a Relational” and other identity positions seems to enhance the theoretical concept that the couple, the marital pair, should be seen as a triad because it is constantly including and excluding a third (Bowen, 1984; Bénoit *et al.*, 1988; Relvas, 2000).

The normative changes of the couple’s life cycle seem to represent moments of crisis in the multivocality management of the self system. Nevertheless, this crisis should be understood, according to the curious definition of Minuchin (1979), as opportunity and risk: opportunity of change and risk of pathology. The dialogical self is an intricate system susceptible of both change and stabilization. Contrarily to the moments of monologue as defined above, the monological interaction (refusal of dialogism) reduce the multiplicity of the positions to an authoritarian one making the negotiation of meanings difficult (see Gonçalves & Guilfoyle, 2006) putting a person in the place of an actor in the process authorized by others (society, culture, significant others). At these moments, the self system works as a closed system that, facing the unexpected situations, reacts in the way defined by restriction. However, when the individuals are willing to search for a wide range of meanings to deal with the unexpected and the change, their self-system reveals characteristics such as flexibility and capacity of adaptation. The dialogical interaction between the I-positions protects the multiplicity of meanings and allows the person to remain the co-author of the change. The continuous search for an adaptive and dynamic balance between these two poles is the only way to guarantee that individuals will never “disarm from the desire to be others” (as poetically says the Mozambican writer Mia Couto).

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