Forms of Talk and Shared Worlds of Meaning: Language, Culture and Social Interaction at Home, School, and in Healthcare Settings[*]

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Abstract

The essay which introduces the Special Issue, focuses on language and social interaction conceived of as the primary tools through which cultures, social organizations, moral orders and individuals' identities are both presupposed and constituted, (re)instantiated and altered on an everyday basis. In one word, it focuses on language and social interaction as the main vehicle of what – opening up the meaning of the term beyond its usual semantic borders – we could term 'education'. After reconstructing the history of such a theoretical milestone, the paper presents the contributions in the Special Issue and focuses on three domains where the agency of language and social interaction in building (temporarily) shared worlds of meaning, social identities, and ethical horizons is particularly at stake: family, school and healthcare contexts. In these domains, although by no means only there, talk does things and connects the macro-order of social structures, shared ontologies, epistemologies and deontologies with the micro-order of everyday life, The contributions in this Special Issue investigate what talk does and how in these domains where education is always at stake, visibly or invisibly.

Keywords: *language and culture; social interaction; education; care; values.*

1. Introduction

This special issue focuses on language and social interaction as the primary tools through which cultures, social organizations, moral orders and individuals' identities are both presupposed and constituted, (re)instanti-

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ated and altered on an everyday basis. In one word, it focuses on language and social interaction as the main vehicle of what – opening up the meaning of the term beyond its usual semantic borders – we could term 'education'. Indeed, and drawing on Jerome Bruner's *lectio* (1996), we conceive of education as the process where cultural knowledge is presupposed, displayed, transmitted as well as locally negotiated, and rebuilt through social interaction. According to this definition, 'education' is a pervasive phenomenon. It is at stake not only in expert-novice interaction, but also in any interaction where common worlds of meanings are presupposed and temporarily established, shared, questioned and changed; when an epistemic gap is at stake and interactionally overcome; when a moral stance, a definition of the situation, a hypothesis concerning the future, an interpretation of the past are advanced and produce, deliberately or not, a change in a person's cognitive, moral or psychological status. As Piero Bertolini (1988) had it adopting a phenomenological perspective, education is the communicative process of cultural transmission between "intentional human beings" (i.e., individuals endowed with sense-making competence) that produces evolution, development and change in ways that are culturally and historically situated. Its outcome, i.e., the formation of culturally competent members, is conceived of as a joint construction by interacting individuals engaged in ongoing negotiations of meaning and sense-making. These negotiations between intentional human beings are communicative in nature (Bertolini, 1994).

If defined in such a large sense, education is the very process that guarantees the famous micro-macro link (Alexander, 1987) or, in other terms, the agency-structure recursive relationship. Education is indeed a social process in and through which Discourses with capital D and Structures with capital S shape everyday discourses and practices that, at the same time, (re)shape these same social structures, moral orders and socio-historical worldviews. If it were not so, we would witness either unchanging social worlds always reproduced from one generation to another, or just loose sets of unrecognizable patterns, evanescent and ephemeral ways of living and, ultimately, nothing similar to those relatively enduring forms of life and webs of meanings that we use to call "culture". As Bertolini (1988) maintained, both scenarios are quite fictional and clearly disproved by history. By iterating, confirming yet also defying the constitutive dimensions of our Lifeworld, education – in the large sense of the term – is the core process of the constitution of both intersubjective and individual world visions. As Bruner (1996) argued, education is not only the social practice through which individuals become culturally competent members of the social group(s) they belong to, it is also the practice through which culture and social structures are negotiated and transformed. In a few words, education can, and actually does, change what it depends on. The main, although by no means the only, tool for this recursive process of culture-mind construction is language. In the next section, I will focus on what educational scholars can never emphasize

enough: a) language, interaction and culture are the unavoidable mediators between the mind and the world, and b) they are experience-building and knowledge-construction tools.

2. Language and culture: the inescapable mediators of experience

It has been decades since philosophers and linguistic anthropologists called our attention to the "responsibility in the use of language" (De Monticelli, 2021: 71), i.e., to the ways in which we name and say the world[1]. In doing so, they recognize the possibilities, heuristic force and even performativity of language, i.e., its power to create and transform social reality, make a difference, and have effects (see the notions of agency *of* language and agency *in* language, Caronia & Orletti, 2019; Duranti, 2004). This call, which in the last decades acquired ethical and political stakes (Silverstein, 2022), points to and is accountable because of the role of language as the unescapable mediator between mind and reality, its denotative and constitutive functions, its role in allowing for and shaping thoughts (yet also perceptions and emotions). Furthermore, language itself is conceived of as imbued with culture to the point that its syntactics, semantics, pragmatics and social uses are hardly separable from the net of meanings, values, norms, premises and assumptions that constitute a social group's ontology, epistemology and even ethics. As Bakhtin had it:

> each word tastes of the […] contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life'[…]. Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin 1981: 293-294)

After the so-called linguistic turn in the second half of the XX century, it is now commonsensical to advance that language is a culture shaped-culture shaping medium, a semiotic artefact which does not convey already conceived meanings, express thoughts or index realities, but constitutes what it appears to merely denote, convey or index. As a consequence of having acknowledged "the ubiquity of language" (Rorty, 1982)[2], we cannot conceive the mind as emerging in a socio-cultural vacuum anymore,

1 This section draws upon and cross arguments developed in Caronia 2021 and 2022.

2 "The ubiquity of language is a matter of language moving into the vacancies left by the failure of all the various candidates for a position of 'natural starting-points' of thoughts, starting-points that are prior to and independent of the ways some culture speaks or spoke. (Candidates for such a starting-points include clear and distinct ideas, sense-data, categories of pure understanding, structures of pre-linguistic consciousness, and the like)" (Rorty, 1982: xx).

nor think about the moral development of children as happening out of, and independently from, specific cultural and linguistic architectures. Rather, and at least since Vygotsky's rediscovery (Vygotsky 1962, 1978), scholars in education, psychology and anthropology concur in maintaining the cultural origin of human development (see among others, Cole & Bruner, 1971; Cole, 1996; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Wertsch, 1985, 1991; Duranti, Ochs, & Schieffelin, 2012; Tomasello, 1999, 2014). Even those still anchored to variants of the universalistic stance, aimed at demonstrating the possibility for a transcendental mind to attain the "thing as such", or arguing for the inscription of values *in re*, cannot but recognize the ultimate dependency of thought from language and culture. Let's follow Roberta De Monticelli (2021) who, in her plea for the universal, non-arbitrary nature of values, affirms:

> individuals do not live as moral subjects before emerging from their original communities, but after. Once they have emerged from these communities, however, they free themselves of them and potentially dissolve them. […] We do not exist as independent moral subjects before these communities, in which we are subject, in our long neoteny until adolescence, to a learning process of language, reality, and values outside of which no one would be able to individuate him or herself from another as a sensible, voluntary, and reasonable agent. Reasonable agents are not only personal and nonreplicable but have also an identity that embodies the universally shared dispositions of humans in a very particular way: as a native of a language and a culture, with a normative structure *proper* to him or her, and with a corresponding axiological order – that is, as the bearer of a particular ethos. One cannot grow up and become an individual except by emerging from a community of shared life. (p. 67)

Even when claiming the possibility for any human being to "free themselves" from the communities they belong to, or when assuming that human beings embody – in particular ways – "universally shared dispositions", the universalism-oriented philosopher cannot but acknowledge the mediating role of language and culture in our experience. It is out of the scope of this paper to underline that and how such an acknowledgement infringes the philosopher's universalistic dream and cargo cult as to the possibility for a transcendental mind to function freely from history and culture (see Caronia, 2013, 2022). I will limit myself to underlining that acknowledging the mediating role of language perfectly accounts for what is evident for any scholar in education: the inescapable socio-cultural origin of (individual) mind and knowledge.

There are two places where the constitutive role of language is uncontestably at stake, at least from an educational point of view. First, and as it is evident when observing children's growing process, any encounter with the world is mediated by language and culture. This is patently at stake when experts mediate the novice's experience with the surrounding envi-

ronment by filling the zone between her mind and the immediate environment with words, gestures, postures, facial expressions and gaze. However, the same mediating process is at stake also in what looks like, at first gaze, an unmediated and solitary learning experience. The mere fact that a child is located in an environment (rather than another), the environment as such with its material features (the presence or absence of objects, the kind of objects that are present or not, their texture, sizes, colors) and social features (the presence or absence of other people around, what kind of people are present or not, the presence of human voices vs silence) culturally mediate the encounter between an apparently solitary "individual" mind and the surrounding reality. But, even if we assumed that the human mind could grasp the "essence" of the reality out there in ways that were independent from language, culture and social interaction, we could not but accept that language still intervenes in a second, less visible, place. Anyhow and whatever a mind grasped from a reality out there, there is no way to represent and communicate it without resorting to a semiotic artefact (Spinicci, 2000). Although certainly not the only one, language is by far the most "at hand" and even the primary modeling system. This necessary representational step imports that whatever the *repraesentandum* is, it cannot but pass through the filter and mold of its *repraesentans* and therefore acquires or loses features, shape and even social existence. Even if we admitted, as some scholars in philosophy and education still do, that meaning and values are *in re* indexed by a given reality's affordances (De Monticelli, 2021, Costa, 2015; 2018; 2019), we cannot but recognize that, in order to experience what these affordances point to, one needs to have learned to pay attention to those affordances (and not other) and what these affordances are meant to indicate. This is precisely what happens in any expert-novice interaction where the novice is introduced to a culturally shaped world by means of forms of talk and other semiotic artefacts. In other words, if objects' affordances are not made relevant by someone through a semiotic system (gestures, language, gaze direction or any other Peircean *interpretans*), they lay down un-experienced. If we accept the hypothesis that any lived experience is and cannot but be mediated by language and social interaction (Mantovani, 1998), that none encounters the world as a biblical Adam (Bakhtin, 1981: 279), then we have to acknowledge that the results of such an experience (e.g., knowledge, lived experience, emotional reaction and even perception) depend on the most variable dimensions of all: languages, cultures and forms of talk. The human mind, e.g., the philosophers' transcendental logos, direct intuition and similar constructs, can work only because it is nourished by what opens up and, concurrently, closes possibilities for thinking, experiencing, and perceiving: language and its situated use. As Vygotsky (1962) convincingly maintained, differences in language and forms of interaction are the basic explicative principle of differences in ways of thinking and copying with reality.

Although some general claims on the constitutive role of language in the making of intersubjectively constituted, socio-culturally different world-vi-

sions can be traced back to German romanticism, the issue has spanned all over the XX century and it is far from being considered of as resolved. We owe to the XX century's acknowledgement of the generating (rather than expressing) role of language, our contemporary sense of how culture and cognition create each other in and through (different) language-mediated practices. The following quote from Charles Wright Mills, like his famous statement: "motives are words" (Wright Mills, 1940), perfectly synthetizes the constitutive relationship between "language and thought".

> Language, socially built and maintained, embodies implicit exhortations and social evaluations. By acquiring the categories of a language, we acquire the structured "ways" of a group, and along with the language, the value-implicates of those "ways." Our behavior and perception, our logic and thought, come within the control ambit of a system of language. Along with language, we acquire a set of social norms and values. A vocabulary is not merely a string of words; immanent within it are societal textures, institutional and political coordinates. Back of a vocabulary lies sets of collective action. (Wright Mills, 1939: 677)

Research in domains as different as linguistic anthropology, education, and social psychology collected evidence of the different ways in which different languages segment reality, prioritize qualities and attribute them a primary or secondary status as to the definition of a given *eidos* or even *ethos* (Duranti, 2001a, 2001b, 2004). This issue was first raised regarding the ways different languages denote (and therefore produce) discrete realities whether they be material (e.g., colors or snow) or social, e.g., status or kinship relationships. From this standpoint, particular attention has been paid to the ways in which the lexicon of different languages (or varieties) segment (relevant) semantic fields along a continuum from hypo-coded to hyper-coded fields (Eco, 1975). The classic examples of language variation for color terms as well as the highly controversial case of different words for types of snow and ice in Arctic languages have been illustrating this point for decades. As Duranti (2011) observes, lexicon and grammar of different languages differ also as to the potentially relevant dimensions of the referent they encode (or not) such as its matter, form, gender, number, or even its location with respect to the speaker. They differ also with respect to the evidential modality of the speakers' knowledge claim, as well as the source of the information delivered (e.g. reported or first-hand, see Mithun, 2004). Languages differ also in the ways they encode the famous Kantian a priori universal categories of experience: space and time (Hanks, 1990). As any caregiver knows, at least tacitly and procedurally, words (coupled with pointing) are the primary tool for segmenting the indistinct reality into culturally relevant entities and orient the child's attention toward these culturally segmented discrete realities, space and time included. Although less visible, this constitutive relationship between language and the experienced

reality is at stake in any experience, far beyond the child's developmental and language acquisition stages. As Goodwin's notion of "professional vision" (Goodwin, 1994) indexes, ways of seeing and experiencing the world differ as they are shaped by different vocabularies (e.g., professional languages) that make us see what can go unnoticed for those who do not share the "worldview" inscribed in (a) language. As research on linguistic diversity indubitably demonstrated, far from simply representing distinctions as they are in a reality out there, different vocabularies (e.g., the professional registers or languages for specific purposes within the same historic-natural language) project distinctions or at least transform objective affordances in meaningful saliences (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996; Lucy, 1992a, 1992b, 1997). In a few words and resorting to a famous statement by Bakhtin (1981), "language is never a neutral medium" (p. 294) as it encompasses worldviews, sets meaningful differences and ways to classify (i.e., order) reality, canonizes legitimated and normative ways of speaking and therefore acting in the world, sustains, iterates *but also challenges and transforms* social organizations and segmentations, moral orders and even ways of thinking. Although this view of language can (and actually did) provide a basis to claim for cultures incommensurability, conceptual schemes incompatibility or even moral relativism, this drift is far from being necessary. Noticing the constitutive relationship between "language and thought" does not imply by any means that we are cognitive or moral hostages of a given language. Language is not a static monolithically or homogenous mold, but rather a flexible dynamically changing tool that can be (and is) tacitly or reflexively transformed to meet human (cognitive) activities, knowledge, ideologies, discoveries, new ideas or alternative views. Further, any firstly acquired vocabulary (and inscribed "world-vision") evolves over time as the child grows up, enters new communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and is exposed to their linguistic varieties or, in multilingual milieux, other languages endowed with allegedly different world-visions and ways to segment reality. Lastly, even adults can and actually do learn new languages or varieties and appropriate the world vision inscribed in their structures. Neither language nor cognition are static phenomena, they co-evolve over time. As Rorty (1996) maintains – building on Dewey's, Wittgenstein's and Gadamer's ideas – sharing a language is sharing a way to see life and a minimal agreement on what is reasonable doing or saying in various circumstances. Yet language does not (necessarily) close the mind within a conceptual scheme: provided that "thought [is not] imprisoned within a single vocabulary" (p. 26), language potentially enables speakers to multiplying alternative views of reality and enhance their ways of thinking and experiencing, precisely *because* it "is not a neutral medium".

The contributions in this special issue focus on three domains where the agency of language and social interaction in building (temporarily) shared worlds of meaning, social identities, and ethical horizons is particularly at

stake: family, school and healthcare contexts. In these domains, although by no means only there, talk does things, connects the micro-order of everyday life and the macro-order of social structures, shared ontologies, epistemologies and deontologies. These contributions investigate what talk does and how.

3. Forms of talk in family, school, and healthcare contexts

3.1. *Forms of talk in the family*

The educational density of everyday family talk has been a focus of inquiry since the 1980s (for an overview see Caronia, 2021) but still many phenomena remain under-investigated. Focusing on the intersection of the two main spheres of children's development (Brofenbrenner, 1979), i.e., the family and the school, Morgenstern, Beaupoil-Hourdel, de Pontonx, Nguyen and Bedoin investigate talk about school in family dinners. This specific intersection of the two spheres is dense of consequences as family dinners are orchestrated and lived by members as a ritual that plays a crucial role in the situated constitution of the family's "small culture" (Holliday, 1999), family members' identities and belonging to the larger cultural community (see among others Galatolo & Caronia, 2018; Caronia, Colla, & Galatolo, 2021). Forms of talk and topics talked into existence in family dinners acquire relevance precisely because they occur within the framework of such a daily ritual. Whether topics are proximal (e.g., the body posture or etiquette rules, and table good manners, Caronia & Colla, 2024a) or distal (e.g., narratives from the school day) with respect to the ongoing interaction and actual environment, they do make a developmental difference. As the authors of the contribution theoretically advance and empirically show, family dinner talk facilitates children's internalization of cultural premises, social norms, and beliefs that shape children's identity as learners. By being picked up, introduced in the conversation (mostly by parents) and treated though language and other communicative modalities (e.g., embodied gesture, or materialized through objects), "school" is treated as a legitimate issue, it acquires relevance and features as it is managed in interaction by adults and children. Following the authors' unparalleled fine-grained analysis and visual documents, the readers discover the practical accomplishment of school-family partnership, they literally see school-oriented families perfectly aligned to the school culture, frameworks and even forms of talk. Decades of research on family-school partnership attest that such alignment is a resource for children's academic success (see Caronia & Colla, 2024b; Colla, 2023). From this standpoint and inevitably enough, the contribution of Morgenstern, Beaupoil-Hourdel, de Pontonx, Nguyen and Bedoin raises the issue of what happens to children that cannot rely on school-aligned parents, on the canonization of school as a rel-

evant topic of conversation, or on family daily rituals where school-life is endowed with meaning and value. What happens when Bronfenbrenner's two major spheres of socialization do not smoothly intersect or do not intersect at all as if they were separate, independent, social worlds? The child who happens to be the only "trans-contextual being" (Caronia, Dalledonne Vandini, 2019) bears the burden of navigating these two, sometimes very different worlds.

Andorno's contribution sheds light on this possibility by investigating a family routine that is meant to bridge family and school cultures: homework. In particular, she presents data on homework sessions designed to mitigate linguistic and cultural barriers that hinder parental involvement in school-related activities at home. Growing up in a multilingual environment is not an easy task when the language of the family and the language of the school are exclusively used in their relative domain and the child is the only member who masters, or should master, both. When it comes to homework, parents risk being at the same time assumed by the school as school-aligned, school-supporters partners (see Caronia, Colla, 2024b) and linguistically unable to play this role. When the dominant world vision or pedagogic dogma assume that the parent *should be* involved in their children's school-life and perform as a partner in the name of the school-family educational co-responsibility (see Gigli, 2016, 2021), not behaving as such amounts to not aligning to the cultural model of "good parent". Parents' credibility in the eyes of their children and their developmentally necessary role as the "authoritative validator of reality" risk to be profoundly undermined. Although implicitly, the school "imposes" a family-based, language-mediated routine (i.e., homework) that amounts to excluding parents when they are not linguistically competent in the language of the school and/or in the host society school culture. Insistingly enough, and as Andorno illustrates, language mediation is also a remedy to the breakdown occasioned by the encounter between the language and culture of the school and the language and culture of the home implied by homework. By analyzing data from a research project involving bilingual educators in mediating children and parent's interaction during homework, Andorno shows how the triadic interaction between the child, the cultural and linguistic mediator and the parent is effective in promoting parents' agency, giving them back their role in sustaining their children's academic life, and ultimately in restoring parents' credibility as a competent interlocutor and a source of knowledge.

Adopting a fine-grained analytical perspective, Colla focuses on another under investigated phenomenon: children' socialization to sports and sports culture in family interactions. Sport, just like any other "piece of reality", is made relevant or not through talk and social interaction, acquires or loses relevance and features depending on how it is talked into being and managed as a topic in conversation. Even speakers' stance about sports (just like any other topics) are managed in interaction, shaped, valued, legitimized or sanctioned in and through the ways they are expressed

and reacted to by the interlocutors (DuBois, 2007). It is by following everyday, ordinary talk-in-interaction that we grasp where and how more general patterns originate and become what is often and commonsensically referred to with generic and rough labels like "Italian vs US culture of sports", "élite families vs. low-class families' ideas about sports". Further, and as Colla demonstrates, family discourses about sports are also arenas where children are socialized to larger moral principles. As she contends, when participating in ordinary sports-related interactions, children are socialized not only to sports rules and values (e.g., loyalty, sportsmanship) but also to culture-specific worldviews and moral concepts (e.g., commitment, responsibility), i.e., children are nurtured into morally and culturally competent subjects. Through the magnifying lens of Colla's analysis of this specific and even anodyne practice, we can appreciate the micro-macro link at work. As she illustrates via the analysis of family discourses about sports, cultural models, world visions, collective ethos do have a visible and hearable social existence: they shape the discourses and actions of individuals who speak and act as informed cultural beings, yet they are concurrently locally constituted, made relevant, confirmed, and transmitted "for another next first time" (Garfinkel, 1967) in and through those discourses and actions.

3.2. *Forms of talk at school*

There are many communities and social occasions where education is made in and through forms of talk-in-interaction and the mediation of other semiotic artefacts: the school is of course one of them and – at least in Northwestern societies – it can even be conceived of as a natural context of sociocultural development. At school children not only learn academic subject matters but through the ways teachers talk to them and manage social participation, they also learn how to behave communicatively in culturally appropriate ways. Exploring the management of turn taking, Margutti investigates how teachers determine and rule out the pupils' access to talk, in terms of both timing and topic. Since the first description by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), classroom discourse and forms of interaction changed over time and the formality of the famous three parts exchange (Initiation, Reply, Feedback) is decreasingly representative of the ways in which participation in classroom talk goes. In whole-class sessions, children are still given the turn by the teacher, but there are occasions where they bid for it. As Margutti shows, pupils display a quite interesting degree of agency in a) bidding for the turn when they are not the officially addressed recipient, and b) perform a variety of actions which are not necessarily those projected by the teachers' turn. For instance, they comment upon what the teacher just said, or complete her unfinished questions. Interestingly enough, these ways of participating are not always overtly sanctioned by the teachers. By adopting a conversation-analysis approach to video-recorded data collected in primary school (3rd year), Margutti pro-

vides the reader with a fine-grained description of what happens moment-by-moment and makes visible the invisible but operating norms and moral identities to which the children and the teachers orient to in conducting the interaction. Thanks to Margutti's analysis we come to see that what being a "good pupil" means is less a matter of knowing the good answer than of showing that one has it, in the right moment of the ongoing interaction. Although Margutti does not speculate about the sociocultural ethos embedded in these forms of interactions, her contribution raises issues concerning who the "good pupil" inscribed in these forms of talk is. When bidding for the turn is the participating rule and competing for the floor is the way to become the next speaker in classroom interaction, the survival of the fittest or the success of the fastest seem to be at stake. Are these cues of what contemporary anthropologists of education call the "neoliberal child" cultural model (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2021; Kremer-Sadlik, 2025)?

Classroom talk is also addressed by Pugliese who investigates talk about book and storytelling as alternative formats to mainstream literary reading education. By investigating the core dimension (i.e., the combination of reading and talking) of alternative formats to canonical literature education (e.g., *literary circle, reading aloud, book club*, etc.), Pugliese engages in analyzing its cultural premises and social consequences: what if an individual act turns into (or start from its very beginning as) an interactive social event? By resorting to a conversion analytic approach to book talk in the classroom, Pugliese illustrates how – by participating in such an event – pupils learn how to perform both as storytellers and as listeners, which means acquiring and practicing social roles and related communicative competences. Yet, what counts the most is again the ethos inscribed in the structure of participation and forms of talk of this communicative event: far from being "just" an academic-related event, it encompasses a larger cultural view concerning the intersubjective dimension of individual experience (i.e., reading a book). In these communicative events designed by the teachers, children learn how to act appropriately in ways that are socially sanctioned and channeled by someone else (e.g., the teacher), how to raise their classmates' interest in a book, how to transform a reading experience into a storytelling experience where the audience should be taken into account, how to act as audience who inevitably is a co-author who contributes to the storytelling by their backchannels, questions and even silences (Duranti & Brenneis, 1986). Thanks to Pugliese's contribution, the reader is able to vividly see what is often stated but unfortunately never demonstrated (enough): far from being mere places where instruction is at stake, school interactions are social events where children learn how to live as members of a community where canons, norms, values and standards are at stake and the "I perspective" is and has to be constantly balanced with the "we perspective".

Although less evidently, the need to balance the "I-We" perspectives is at stake also in parent-teacher interactions where the parents' vision of their own idiosyncratic child-at-home "encounters" the teachers' vision of the pupil, i.e., the child-at-school. Both parties should a) learn from the

other one what they do not know or not directly, b) provide access to and make inspectable their own epistemic territory, and c) behave according to their institutionally sanctioned identities (Caronia, 2023; Caronia & Dalledonne Vandini, 2019). By exploring the case of parent-teacher conferences involving parents who do not master the language of the encounter, Sordella shows the kind of difficulties they encounter in negotiating shared understandings of "who should do what" when supporting students' learning processes. Her analysis vividly shows participants' struggles in negotiating a common ground as to the pupil's educational trajectory, as well as the difficulties in co-constructing a shared "child's image" across the encounters. Clearly enough, more than a linguistic gap is at stake. Or better, the linguistic gap produces other gaps and undermines reciprocal understanding. As a matter of fact, appropriate language-use-in-interaction is a vehicle not only for information exchange but even more for the raising and the management of social images, for the construction, transmission and display of cultural models (e.g., the "good parent", the "good pupil") and, ultimately, for building and maintaining the so-called school-family partnership which, as any *contrat social*, presupposes and produces a shared world of meaning.

3.3. *Healthcare settings*

It has been six decades since the relevance of the forms of talk in healthcare settings has been acknowledged and became an issue of concern for both social researchers and practitioners (Heritage & Maynard, 2006). Since the 1960s indeed, an astonishing number of studies have been focusing on language use in medical settings tracing changes and inertia in medical culture and communicative practices (see Caronia, 2026). Despite striking cases and enduring malpractices (see Fasulo, this issue), we have witnessed a radical change in the cultural model governing the so-called "care" or "helping" professions (i.e., "medicine, nursing, psychotherapy, counseling, social work, education or coaching", Graf *et al.*, 2014). From the psychotherapy domain where it was conceived of by Carl Rogers (1951, 1961), the so-called "patient's centered approach" slowly migrated and joined Edith Balint's (1969) plaid for a patient-centered medicine conceived as "understanding the patient as a unique human being". Two subcriteria of Roger's proposal – i.e., non-directivity by the caregiver's side and self-determination by the client's side – and two tools – i.e., dialogue and active listening – are worth mentioning here. The first ones set the premises for what evolved into the flattening of doctors' epistemic and deontic authority in the doctor-patient relationship, the second inaugurated a normative way to communicatively accomplish patient-centered care. In the name of the "client-centered approach" (Bensing *et al.*, 2000; Mead & Bower, 2000; Langberg, Dhyr, & Davidsen, 2019), professionals have begun to be held accountable for their practices and can no longer base their claims solely on the professional authority that would 'naturally'

belong to them (Peräkylä, 1998). Patients or companions are increasingly legitimized as a source of valuable knowledge, agentic subjects of their own care journey and ratified participants in what is now known as shared decision-making (for a comprehensive portrait of the bright and dark sides of the patient-centered approach, see Caronia, 2026). The contributions in this Special Issue shed light on this Galilean revolution in healthcare practices investigating the forms of talk and related educational implications at stake in three different phenomena: the learning process of "becoming a patient", doctor-patient interaction, and the overlooked dimension of language in healthcare guidelines and protocols.

By resorting to Hilary Mantel autobiographical narrative, Fasulo illustrates how the experiential learning implied in "becoming a patient" is still pinpointed by experiences of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Schwab, 2008; Buchman *et al.*, 2017) and systematic degradation of the patient's lay knowledge and point of view on her own status. As Fasulo maintains, despite the contemporary focus on "health literacy" as the knowledge we need to both pursue a healthy life and cope with diseases, the path for patients with chronic diseases is still a long and winding learning journey. First and as Fasulo maintains, once a diagnosis has been reached, there is learning about the condition and the treatments, through either healthcare practitioners or other sources. Second, there is learning about one's own relation with the condition: the way it manifests in one's body and mind, when to expect its effects, how to adjust to it. And third, there is learning about the medical world and how to interact with it: what is the medical perspective on the condition and the people affected, what appears relevant to report and when, what are the thresholds for requesting help. As Fasulo shows through the lenses of Hilary Mantel's narrative of her condition, despite 60 years now since the patient centered care turn, the learning journey is far from being appeased. However, and interestingly enough, the case of Hilary Mantel illustrates also the healing properties of words and particularly of narrative writing. As the Narrative Medicine approach maintains (Charon, 2001), textualization allows for the shaping and ordering of lived experience, engaging in sense-making and standing up for oneself. Becoming the author of one's own version of what being a patient is, is a way of coping, coming to terms with and even understanding what otherwise cannot but remain intractable and often unacceptable.

Providing the reader with a more optimistic view of the forms of talk in healthcare settings, Ranzani investigates a general practitioner's ways of talking to elderly patients. Relying on conversation analysis theoretical and analytical constructs, Ranzani unveils how the general practitioner displays his orientation to making biomedical information accessible while concurrently avoiding treating the patient as an incompetent interlocutor. This goal is achieved through a set of identifiable multimodal resources designed on the recipient such as: formulations from technical into lay language, the use of the regional language, metaphors and similes, iconic gestures, touching, pointing, and the use of material artifacts like docu-

ments or pens. Following Ranzani's case study, the reader can acknowledge how it is communicatively possible to balance what – at first sight – appear to be two incompatible goals: orienting, channeling and even directing the elderly patients' behavior, and treating them as competent, agentic, responsible persons. The orientation toward the patient as an agentic and competent interlocutor is not (only) a matter of a general practitioner's idiosyncratic ethics, it is also the professional stance put forward by policymakers. Indeed, and as the contribution by Fox and Mikkola illustrates, communication is the core topic of contemporary healthcare guidelines. Yet and as the authors advance, the ways in which communication is textually framed is not neutral. Rather, it encompasses worldviews and ideologies. By making the case of "interprofessionality" – one of the contemporary gold standards in healthcare policies – Fox and Mikkola make the reader abandon any naif view of guidelines, protocols and textual documents intended to shape professional practices: when communicating about how to communicate in healthcare settings, policymakers take a stance, align with ideologies and ways of framing what "care" is or should be. These stances are not always visible yet they are always operating because – once textualized – they "educate" the professionals' vision (Goodwin, 1994) and therefore make a difference in the world of practice.

4. Concluding remarks

As stated above, notwithstanding the different disciplinary perspectives, methodological approaches, substantive topics or the phenomena they focus on, all the contributions in this issue share a notion of language-use-in-interaction as a tool for transmitting, ratifying and maintaining, yet also modifying, challenging, and defying – day by day, one interaction at a time – the crucial dimensions of the world we live in. In doing so, they all enlighten the responsibility of the uttered word inherent to its constitutive and performative force. This responsibility does not concern only laypersons engaged in ordinary conversation. Even more so and as the articles in this issue illustrate, it concerns social actors institutionally engaged in various forms of "education", i.e., a social practice dependent on and informed by world visions, cultural definitions of reality and moral horizons, oriented to (re)produce them but, also, able to change what it depends on.

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