

**Title:** How does Myshkin Communicate? The Misstep of “Double Thought” in Dialogue  
**Author:** Holly Myers, Columbia University

Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky’s hero in *The Idiot*, becomes increasingly tongue-tied by a self-conscious awareness of polyphonic thoughts. As a result, he cannot communicate his best ideas and feelings to even his closest friends at times. His words rarely represent his philosophical ideas and compassionate feelings with any accuracy, so that his essential message is often misunderstood. It may be tempting to consider this motif of miscommunication somehow related to the prince’s position as an outsider, unable to operate within this social code of appropriate language and behavior. Yet, when Myshkin was living in Switzerland as an outsider, a foreigner, he surrounded himself with children, shared his philosophies with them, and was understood. Furthermore, upon his return to Russia from Switzerland, Myshkin forges significant connections with nearly every person whom he meets, and, as will be shown in this paper, the shift from mistrust to understanding is achieved through a particular kind of dialogue. The more time Myshkin spends in this world, however, the more the expression of his thoughts begins to change, his innocent straightforwardness begins to falter as treacherous “double thoughts” clamor for attention, which affects the prince’s ability to communicate his most lofty ideas and feelings to those around him. The openness and oneness of human existence, the transparency with which Adam and Eve lived in their earthly paradise before eating from the Tree of Knowledge, is lost in a polyphony of languages that begets discordance among us, a confusion of tongues that fills us with doubt and facilitates deception. Prince Myshkin’s doomed movement through the novel, as he steps away from divine one-mindedness into the multi-voicedness of our earthly world, corresponds to this Biblical trajectory.