THE BAKHTIN READER

Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov

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as if thereby it were made newly meaningful or 'made strange' as our formalists would say. The Oedipus complex is indeed a magnificent way of making the family unit 'strange'. The father is not the entrepreneur, and the son is not his heir - the father is only the mother's lover, and his son is his rival!

Precisely this novel and piquant 'meaningfulness', imparted to all those aspects of life that have lost their meaning, is what has attracted so broad a public to Freudianism. The obviousness and certitude of sexual drives contrast here with the ambiguity and uncertainty of all other social ideological values. Sexuality is declared the supreme criterion of reality, of essentiality. And the more déclassé a person is, the more keenly he senses his 'naked naturalness', his 'elementalness'.

Freudianism - 'the psychology of the déclassés' - is becoming the acknowledged ideological persuasion of the widest strata of the European bourgeoisie. Here is a fact profoundly symptomatic and indicative for anybody who wishes to grasp the spirit of Europe today.

The basic aspiration of the philosophy of our time is to create a world beyond the social and the historical. The 'cosmism' of Steiner's anthroposophy, the 'biologism' of Bergson, and, finally, the 'psychobiologism' and 'sexualism' of Freud that we have examined here - all these three trends, sharing the entire bourgeois world among them, have, each in its own way, served the aspiration of the latest philosophy. They have endowed with their own features the physiognomy of the modern Kulturmensch - the Steinerian, the Bergsonian, the Freudian - and they have raised the three altars of his belief and veneration - Magic, Instinct and Sex. Where the creative paths of history are closed, there remain only the blind alleys of the individual 'livings out' of a life bereft of meaning.

### 3 Language as Dialogic Interaction

In this extract from *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* the positive agenda for a Marxist account of language is set out. It would, Voloshinov/Bakhtin claims, inevitably provide concomitant enlightenment for the Marxist study of ideology since both centre upon the production of meaning. A property Marxist understanding needs to account, at the micro level, for individual consciousness and, at the macro level, with the whole social arena of meaning production in the various ideological fields of politics, religion, literature, daily life and so on, and with the process of their historical change. Rejecting subjective psychology's false division between the individual and the social, Voloshinov/Bakhtin brings these two levels together in the 'sign'. The use of this term indicates that despite the critique of abstract objectivism, semiotic approaches to language are seen as useful and influential.

Part I of the extract (taken from *Marxism*, I.1) explains the material, objective nature of the sign as always concretely embodied in external reality. Moreover, the existence of signs is only possible between socially organized beings. Hence the concept of the sign provides the basis for an objective sociological understanding of individual consciousness and ideology (i.e., general social meaning) to replace idealist and psychologist location of all meaning in the individual psyche or soul.

Part II of the extract (taken from I.2) turns explicitly to the macro level: the relationship of the economic basis of society to its ideological superstructures like science, arts, religion, law, etc. The fundamental problem is set out as that of providing a flexible and dialectic way of understanding the complex and mutual interactions whereby changes in the base process through to 'refraction' in the various superstructures. It is the word as sign which Voloshinov/Bakhtin offers as the potential solution to this problem. 'The word is implicated in literally each and every act or contact between people', and for that reason the word or sign is the 'most sensitive index of social change'. Understanding the multiple social forms of verbal interaction (speech performances and genres) and the way they change through time offers an objective way of approaching the interaction of ideology with the ultimately determining base.

Part III (taken from I.3 and II.3) returns to the micro level of individual consciousness, especially as experienced subjectively as inner feelings and inner speech. It is argued that inner speech is best understood as dialogue; a continuous two-way interaction between the subjective and the social. This leads on to a consideration of the two-way interaction of all utterances: 'As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addressee and addressee.' The recognition that all utterances are inherently dialogic enables Voloshinov/Bakhtin to offer an answer to the initial question: what is the basic nature of the phenomenon termed language? 'The actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms, not the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psychophysiological act of its implementation, but the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances.

'Thus, verbal interaction is the basic reality of language' (p. 94).

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3 'Making it strange' is a central idea of the Russian formalist critics; art attempts to make what has become familiar and ordinary appear strange and defamiliar. For Medvedev/Bakhtin's discussion and critique of formalism, see *Reader*, pp. 135-160.

4 Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925) inaugurated a movement to develop the cognition and realization of spiritual reality; Henri Bergson (1859-1941), French philosopher.
As for the forms of ideological intercourse in the strict sense of the term—forms for political speeches, political acts, laws, regulations, manifestos, and so forth; and forms for poetic utterances, scientific treatises, etc.—these have been the object for special investigation in rhetoric and poetics, but, as we have seen, these investigations have been completely divorced from the problem of language on the one hand, and from the problem of social intercourse on the other. Productive analysis of the forms of the whole of utterances as the real units in the stream of speech is possible only on a basis that regards the individual utterance as a purely sociological phenomenon. Marxist philosophy of language should and must stand squarely on the utterance as the real phenomenon of language-speech and as a socioideological structure.

4 Reported Speech as Index of Social Change

Two fundamental points are established in Parts I and II of Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. First, language is inherently dialogic: every utterance actively responds to other utterances and equally shapes itself in anticipation of an addressee’s response. In effect, every utterance is about other utterances. Secondly, the word as sign is the most sensitive index of change in the socioeconomic base: forms of verbal interaction (speech performances) are determined by prevailing social relations. Thus slow changes in verbal forms indicate large-scale shifts in social relations. In Part III of Marxism (from which this extract is taken), Voloshinov/Bakhtin illustrates just such an historical change in a verbal structure. Logically, given the sense of discourse as dialogic, he takes the case of reported speech—the formal means of registering in speech a response to the speech of another.

An adequate analysis of the forms of reported speech begins with awareness of the dynamic interactive relationship existing between the reporting authorial utterance and the utterance which is being reported. Voloshinov/Bakhtin identifies two directions this relationship between authorial speech and the speech reported can take. He terms the first linear style; this focuses upon the content of the reported speech and maintains a strict boundary between authorial reporting speech and the speech reported. The second direction is towards the pictorial style which focuses upon the individualized qualities and style of the reported speech. Instead of maintaining strict boundaries, this form finds ways of infiltrating the reported speech with authorial retort and response to it, or, alternatively, the reported speech may begin to infiltrate the authorial context. The forms of reported speech which develop this latter tendency of eroding boundaries, of allowing the maximum interactive interference between the zones of reporting and reported speech, are the main focus of Voloshinov/Bakhtin's interest. These are analysed in the forms of indirect discourse, direct discourse (omitted in this extract) and quasi-direct discourse.
Indirect discourse necessitates changing the form of the reported utterance. "Oh dear", she said, has to become something like 'She said that it was a pity'. Voloshinov/Bakhtin sees this transposition as an 'analysing tendency' which can take one of two directions corresponding respectively to the linear and the pictorial styles. Transposition into indirect discourse can either highlight the content (referent-analysing) or the style (texture-analysing) of the reported speech. In the latter, the stylistic emphasis on the reported speech crystallizes it into an image of individualized speech contained within the authorial speech which simultaneously intones a response or attitude to it (irony, approval, etc.).

This dialogic intersecting of two speech acts, two voices intoning within the single utterance, can proceed further in direct discourse. The maximum possibility for reciprocal intonational interference of speech boundaries is found in quasi-direct discourse. The movement towards this highly relativized form of discourse in which no voice is allowed authority and away from authoritative linear style is seen by Voloshinov/Bakhtin as indicative of a fundamental change in social relations.

From V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 1929.


Reported speech is speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time also *speech about speech*, *utterance about utterance*.

Whatever we talk about is only the content of speech, the themes of our words. Such a theme – and it is only a theme – might be, for instance, 'nature', 'man', or 'subordinate clause' (one of the themes of syntax). A reported utterance, however, is not just a theme of speech: it has the capacity of entering on its own, so to speak, into speech, into its syntactic makeup, as an integral unit of the construction. In so doing, it retains its own constructional and semantic autonomy while leaving the speech texture of the context incorporating it perfectly intact.

What is more, a reported utterance treated solely as a theme of speech may be characterized only superficially at best. If its content is to be had to the full, it must be made part of a speech construction. When limited to the treatment of reported speech in thematic terms, one can answer questions as to 'how' and 'about what' so-and-so spoke, but 'what' he said could be disclosed only by way of reporting his words, if only in the form of indirect discourse.

However, once it becomes a constructional unit in the author's speech, into which it has entered on its own, the reported utterance concurrently becomes a theme of that speech. It enters into the latter's thematic design precisely as reported, an utterance with its own autonomous theme: the autonomous theme thus becomes a theme of a theme.

Reported speech is regarded by the speaker as an utterance belonging to *someone else*, an utterance that was originally totally independent, complete in its construction, and lying outside the given context. Now, it is from this independent existence that reported speech is transposed into an authorial context while retaining its own referential content and at least the rudiments of its own linguistic integrity, its original constructional independence. The author's utterance, in incorporating the other utterance, brings into play syntactic, stylistic, and compositional norms for its partial assimilation – that is, its adaptation to the syntactic, compositional, and stylistic design of the author's utterance, while preserving (if only in rudimentary form) the initial autonomy (in syntactic, compositional, and stylistic terms) of the reported utterance, which otherwise could not be grasped in full. . . .

Thus, what is expressed in the forms employed for reporting speech is an active relation of one message to another, and it is expressed, moreover, not on the level of the theme but in the stabilized constructional patterns of the language itself.

We are dealing here with words reacting on words. However, this phenomenon is distinctly and fundamentally different from dialogue. In dialogue, the lines of the individual participants are grammatically disconnected; they are not integrated into one unified context. Indeed, how could they be? There are no syntactic forms with which to build a unity of dialogue. If, on the other hand, a dialogue is presented as embedded in an authorial context, then we have a case of direct discourse, one of the variants of the phenomenon with which we are dealing in this inquiry. . . .

The productive study of dialogue presupposes. . . . a more profound investigation of the forms used in reported speech, since these forms reflect basic and constant tendencies in the active reception of other speaker's speech, and it is this reception, after all, that is fundamental also for dialogue.

How, in fact, is another speaker's speech received? What is the mode of existence of another's utterance in the actual, inner-speech consciousness of the recipient? How is it manipulated there, and what process of orientation will the subsequent speech of the recipient himself have undergone in regard to it?

What we have in the forms of reported speech is precisely an objective document of this reception. Once we have learned to decipher it, this document provides us with information, not about accidental and mercurial subjective psychological processes in the 'soul' of the recipient, but about steadfast social tendencies in an active reception of other speakers' speech, tendencies that have crystallized into language forms. The mechanism of this process is located, not in the individual soul, but in society. It is the function of society to select and to make grammatical (adapt to the grammatical structure of its language) just those factors in the active and evaluative reception of utterances that are socially vital and constant and, hence, that are grounded in the economic existence of the particular community of speakers. . . .
the word. The ideologues of this process, both here and in Western Europe, are the formalistic movements in poetics, linguistics, and philosophy of language. One hardly need mention here what the underlying social factors explaining this process are, and one hardly need repeat Lorck’s well-founded assertion as to the only ways whereby a revival of the ideological word can come about – the word with its theme intact, the word permeated with confident and categorical social value judgment, the word that really means and takes responsibility for what it says.

5 Social Heteroglossia

This extract is taken from Bakhtin’s important essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’ (1935) rpt. in The Dialogic Imagination; there is a further section of this essay on pp. 112–120. Bakhtin’s main purpose in the essay is to discover an adequate poetics of the novel. But, since a stylistics of the novel must deal primarily with the representation of speech, the essay necessarily is much concerned with the ‘philosophy of discourse’ in a ‘contradictory and multi-language world’ (p. 275).

Contradiction and multiplicity are key concepts in this essay in which verbs of struggle and conflict predominate. Rather than abstract linguistic relations, Bakhtin takes the specific concrete historical utterance as locus for understanding the dynamic and creative forces of the ‘life of language’. In Marxism the sign was seen as the point of convergence of individual consciousness with the social, in ‘Discourse and the Novel’ this is termed the utterance. I have tried, in selecting passages for this extract, to keep these two levels and their constant interaction in focus. At both individual and social levels, productive vitality and creativity derive from a continuous dialogic struggle within and between discourses. Language, in this essay, is perceived as stratified through and through into multiple social discourses each representing a specific ideological-belief system, a way of seeing the world: heteroglossia. However, despite the emphasis upon struggle among the different social languages of heteroglossia – different generations, professions, epochs, etc. – what is strikingly absent is any focus, as such upon class. Different ‘socio-ideological groups’ are referred to but only as one among other of the ‘socio-ideological contradictions’ constituting language at any given moment (p. 291).

The extract indicates that it would be a misunderstanding to perceive ‘dialogism’ or ‘heteroglossia’ as opening the way to total linguistic freedom. Heteroglossia is certainly perceived as the constituting condition for the possibility of independent consciousness in that any attempt to impose one unitary monologic discourse as the ‘Truth’ is relativized by its dialogic contact with another social discourse, another view of the world. However,

6 E. Lorck, a German linguist who published a short study of quasi indirect discourse, Die “Erlebterede” (1921).
Bakhtin stresses that the force of centralization is indispensable to the life of language in ‘guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding’; without that core of stability verbal discourse as a system of signs could not exist. Neither does the opposing decentralizing force of heteroglossia liberate the individual speaker into a linguistic free-for-all. On the contrary, ‘only the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word, could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word’ (p. 279). However, it is in this struggle with another’s word that a new word is generated. The dialogic relations of heteroglossia do ensure that meaning remains in process, unfinalizable.

From M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination.


Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language. A unitary language is not something given [dan] but is always in essence posited [zadan] — and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia.1 But at the same time it makes its real presence felt as a force for overcoming this heteroglossia, imposing specific limits to it, guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding and crystallizing into a real, although still relative, unity — the unity of the reigning conversational (everyday) and literary language, ‘correct language’.

A common unitary language is a system of linguistic norms. But these norms do not constitute an abstract imperative; they are rather the generative forces of linguistic life, forces that struggle to overcome the heteroglossia of language, forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought, creating within a heteroglot national language the firm, stable linguistic nucleus of an officially recognized literary language, or else defending an already formed language from the pressure of growing heteroglossia.

What we have in mind here is not an abstract linguistic minimum of a common language, in the sense of a system of elementary forms (linguistic symbols) guaranteeing a minimum level of comprehension in practical communication. We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life. Thus a unitary language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unifica-

1 For dan and zadan, see Glossary.
takes on another character; it is questioned, it is put in a new situation in order to expose its weak sides, to get a feel for its boundaries, to experience it physically as an object. For this reason stylizing discourse by attributing it to a person often becomes parodic, although not crudely parodic – since another’s word, having been at an earlier stage internally persuasive, mounts a resistance to this process and frequently begins to sound with no parodic overtones at all. Novelistic images, profoundly double-voiced and double-languaged, are born in such a soil, seek to objectivize the struggle with all types of internally persuasive alien discourse that had at one time held sway over the author.

6 Speech Genres

This is a short extract from Bakhtin’s essay ‘The Problem of Speech Genres’ (1952–3), rpt. in Speech Genres and Other Late Essays. Speech genres are defined as the typical forms of utterance associated with a particular sphere of communication (e.g., the workplace, the sewing circle, the military), which have therefore developed into ‘relatively stable types’ in the terms of thematic content, style and compositional structure. This concern with the great variety of speech genres returns to a recurrent theme in the ‘Bakhtin/Medvedev/Voloshinov’ texts: the need to work across the usual division between literary discourse and the discourse of everyday life.

It also challenges the distinction of Saussure draws between the utterance (parole), as a completely free combining of form and words in individual speech acts, and language (langue) as a mandatory system of linguistic laws. Speech genres impose their own restrictions of style, content and structure upon all individual speakers although some genres, like oral anecdotes, allow much greater flexibility than others, such as military commands. ‘A speech genre is not a form of language, but a typical form of utterance: as such the genre also includes a certain typical kind of expression that inheres in it’ (p. 87).

The only adequate locus for study of speech genres is the utterance: ‘utterances and their types, that is, speech genres, are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language’ (p. 65). General linguistics – ‘even serious ones like Saussure’s’ (p. 66) – have failed to understand the nature of utterances because they adopt a passive model of meaning and understanding. They perceive language as a speech flow from the speaker to a passive recipient, instead of recognizing the ‘active role of the other in the process of speech communication’ (p. 70). This passive model of speech reception leads to ‘terminological imprecision and confusion’ in linguistic thinking: the utterance as a speech form has not been clearly distinguished from the sentence as a grammatical unit. A considerable part of the essay is at pains to make this distinction. Whereas a sentence has only grammatical boundaries and completeness, the boundaries of the utterance as a unit of speech communication are quite concrete: they are determined by a change of speaking subjects. This form of finalization of an utterance is a defining criterion since it opens up the possibility of responding to it. Utterances, unlike sentences, are inherently interactive; for this reason ‘finalization’ does not imply closure. Every ‘bounded’ utterance is part of the whole chain of utterances. Every utterance is directed at an addressee. This indicates the other defining quality of utterances: they are always expressive and evaluative. Unlike words in a dictionary, words in a speech event are always chosen and accented (given intonation) not just with reference to the theme of the utterance but also with reference to the anticipated response of the addressee and with a backward look at previous utterances. This interactive relationship between speaker and addressee is a crucially determining factor in the stylistic formation of speech genres (especially of intimate and familiar genres) and has had an important and largely unrecognized effect upon the history of literary forms.

From M. M. Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays.


All the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language. Quite understandably, the nature and forms of this use are just as diverse as are the areas of human activity. This, of course, in no way disaffirms the national unity of language. Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity. These utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area not only through their content (thematic) and linguistic style, that is, the selection of the lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of the language, but above all through their compositional structure. All three of these aspects – thematic content, style, and compositional structure – are inseparably linked to the whole of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication. Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances. These we may call speech genres.

The wealth and diversity of speech genres are boundless because the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible, and because each sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex. Special emphasis should be placed on the extreme heterogeneity of speech genres (oral and written). In fact, the category of speech genres should include short rejoinders of daily dialogue (and these are extremely varied