

Bakhtin in sociolinguistics/discourse studies: Readings and open issues

Part of Data Focus Session: What would Bakhtin say? (13/09/05)

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In line with Bakhtin's reception in a wide variety of humanities and social science disciplines, socially minded linguistics (e.g. sociolinguistics, socio-cultural linguistics, discourse studies) has actively engaged in multiple and often competing readings of Bakhtin's work that can be described by the sceptics as appropriations but as I will suggest further down they are better seen as creative understandings, very much in the spirit of what Bakhtin himself envisaged as constructive interpretative work. The most orthodox of such readings has to do with Bakhtin's pairing with post-structuralist approaches. Bakhtin's post-structuralist allegiances are highly questionable and there is quite a bit of controversy surrounding the question of how much of a modernist or post-modernist Bakhtin in fact was, which is outside the scope of this discussion. However, the fact remains that Bakhtin has mainly inspired post-structuralist work and ultimately been closely associated with the *discourse turn*. In this way, he has dovetailed nicely as well as provided insights into the following areas of concern and inquiry within sociolinguistics:

- 1) *The role of situational and social context in language use*: Part of the contextualization of language involves acknowledging the role of local context or co-text (as defined within conversation analysis), that is, the ways in which prior talk shapes upcoming talk in interaction, how one participant's contribution decisively shapes and raises specific tasks and actions for the other participants involved but more fundamentally how language unfolds and is shaped on-line through processes of negotiations and joint understandings, what we often call intersubjective processes. These insights work well with the Bakhtinian dialogism and are frequently enriched by it.
- 2) *The constitutive role of language (for ideologies, identities, etc.)*: This is a widely held assumption within socially minded linguistics: the idea that language does not statically reflect external realities but actively participates in shaping and reshaping them, constructing them anew. The constitutive view of language-in-use lends itself to a conception of self as a social and cultural self, more specifically, as a storied self, a dynamic and evolving entity, a dialogical project, emerging through tellings and retellings of personal but socioculturally mediated stories. The storied self has of course frequently given rise to and been employed not just as an assumption or as an analytic inquiry but as a methodology per se, and an anti-positivist one, an anti-theoretical and anti-abstraction epistemology that allows us to capture the richness of daily life. This line of inquiry again mutually feeds into readings of Bakhtin's work.
- 3) *The socio-culturally shaped variability of language*: Finally, we tend to find Bakhtin even as a passing reference, within studies of sociolinguistic variation that actively seek to document the heterogeneity and fragmentation involved in language practices but also the complicated authenticity involved in notions such as community and membership, which were taken at face value in the earlier and more naïve days of sociolinguistics. These latest studies of how language use interacts with social identities are far removed from earlier monolithic ways of correlating form X with identity Y in a one-to-one way (we often talk of them as 3rd wave); they have also brought in an otherwise technical and at times dry pursuit a refreshing processual aesthetics, a commitment to bringing to the fore rather than sweeping under the carpet the fluidity and fleetingness of the phenomena under investigation. In a chicken and egg kind of way, this work resonates with Bakhtin's dialogicality, more as an ethos and *modus operandi* and less as a faithful application of ideas (it is notable here that the concept of identity which intensely preoccupies work under this heading did not even figure in Bakhtin's writings).

In the light of the above, the question that arises is: why this intense preoccupation of the sociolinguist with Bakhtin? What does Bakhtin buy us? My feeling is that Bakhtin works better not as part of the micro-analytic apparatus in data work but as part of what we can call the mid-level. Given that a lot of our work involves exploring connections, however tenuous, between things on the ground, at the micro-level of specific language use as part of specific instances of communication, on one hand, and the macro-level on the other hand, the forces, processes, operating above and beyond the here-and-now of communication, the ideas of Bakhtin can best work as providing ammunition for forging those connections and relationships. To paraphrase Coupland & Coupland (2004), when talking of the importance of locating and conceptualizing that mid-level, Bakhtin can direct us to the mid-order of discourse. I have to stress here that this distinction between micro, meso, and macro-level should not be taken as clear-cut. It works best as a metaphor, a heuristic for tapping into complex phenomena that work at multiple, overlapping and intersecting levels; in that sense, we increasingly find that at

least for internal dialogue purposes, we have to either refine it or dismiss it altogether. For the purposes of this argument however, locating Bakhtin somewhere at the mid-level helps us understand how he can ultimately work both for fine-tuning macro-accounts of communication and for enriching nose-to-data studies of the fine details of language use. On another level, despite the oft expressed scepticism that different areas use and abuse Bakhtin differently, my view is that Bakhtin has fittingly facilitated dialogue and inter-disciplining with other social science areas. If anything, he has provided an intelligible and recognizable platform for communicating ideas about language.

Open Issues: Where Bakhtin may be hard work

There are however certain areas of concern in this sociolinguistic engagement with Bakhtin or better put open issues which can be summed up as follows:

- Over-emphasis on postmodernist Bakhtin – and as a result-
 - Under-playing/-theorizing the modernist aspects of Bakhtin and/or the “then & there” context of Bakhtin
- Over-emphasis on Bakhtin for “ordinary language”
 - Under-estimating the problems of applicability of his work on novel
- Over-use of “Bakhtin plus” approaches
 - Insufficient reflection on what a Bakhtin-only analysis would involve/miss out on
 - Eschewing incompatibilities in favour of an “eclectic” approach

At the same time, it is true to say that Bakhtin’s championing of the complexity and richness of the mundane at the expense of the grand, his emphasis on the quality of presentness and eventness that he admired in novel, are easily translatable into a focus on ordinary interactions, which currently form the main data of most sociolinguistic work. It is also notable that some of his main insights into dialogism, social languages and voices, as well as speech genres have been fleshed out and in the process systematized and specified (superseded maybe?) by sociolinguistic work: recent work on style/styling (e.g. chapters in Eckert & Rickford 2001; papers in Rampton 1999; for a discussion see Georgakopoulou 2005) is a case in point.

There are also a number of lines of inquiry that could be productively linked with Bakhtin and in that way, Bakhtin could be made to work “harder”. I am singling out three such areas below:

a) Genres and chronotopes as ways of thinking about time and the historicity of data. While Bakhtin’s work on speech genres has usefully informed sociolinguistic approaches, the notion of chronotopes has remained elusive and under-explored (in contrast to proliferating work in e.g. literary theory). Drawing on both genres and chronotopes and exploring their points of connection would involve finding ways of working with time-scales (both historical time and social space as synthesized in chronotopes) in language data. This would serve to combat the common tendency for “presentism” within sociolinguistics that tends to manifest itself in a singular emphasis either on the here and now of specific interactions or on a single corpus of data from a single site, as opposed to integrating socio-spatiotemporal dimensions into the inquiry proper.

b) Language and body politics including affect. In our selection of canonical Bakhtin quotes to be found frequently within sociolinguistics, we have failed to include anything from *Rabelais and his World* where most of this line of inquiry can arguably come from. This “exclusion” is partly a reflection of the emphasis and main preoccupations in the relevant literature, where the *Dialogic Imagination* and *Problems of Dostoevski’s Poetics* have captured most of the analysts’ attention; in this vein, it has mostly been Bakhtin’s language-focused ideas that have been translated into sociolinguistic concerns leaving uncharted some of his best insights into the embodied (as grotesque realism too) and the carnival. At the moment though, there is a recognized need and plea (Cameron & Kulick 2003; Rampton at press) for the proper inclusion in the sociolinguistic inquiry of subjectivity processes so that the focus is shifted from social positions to the less tapped into (fantasizing, desiring, etc.) personas and what Billig aptly describes as the “dialogic unconscious” (1997) that comprises both the said and the unsaid/unsayable, be it fears, desires, anxieties, etc. This shift is premised on a scrutiny of the interanimation of the verbalized with the embodied; on a deprivileging of the former and a fuller understanding of the latter. .

c) Language, ethics and value: Productively linking some of Bakhtin's philosophical concepts and underpinnings with language-focused work would involve an active synthesis of what at the moment remain as disparate ideas (and belonging to different periods of Bakhtin's writing). In this process, the surplus of vision and human-ness that Bakhtin saw as self having vis-à-vis the other, the other's potential and capacity for surprisingness, mostly talked about in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, and last but not least, the concept of unfinalizability, paramount in Bakhtin, could tie well with the ideas of contingency and creativity as well as that of a dialogical self.

Nonetheless, (further) pinning down Bakhtin may not be "possible or desirable" (Gardiner & Bell 1998: 7). Bakhtin himself (particularly in *Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff*) saw the best of interpretative engagements with a piece of work in creative understandings without which genuine dialogue cannot be engendered: these on one hand retain the interpreter's outsideness to the work in question but on the other hand see its potential and "read" it in ways in which the author themselves could not have prescribed, predicted or controlled.

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