

## BAKHTINIAN PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE: SUPPLEMENT

### Mikhail Bakhtin The Problem of Speech Genres

Here, Bakhtin begins by noting that human activity is inextricably related to the use of language, the nature and forms (81) of this use being just as diverse as are the areas of human activity (81), notwithstanding the national unity (81) of a given language. Language is, Bakhtin argues, realised in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity (81). All utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area (81) in their thematic content, style, and compositional structure (81). Bakhtin's point is that each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances (81) which he terms *speech genres*. Indeed, each sphere of activity has an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops (81). Bakhtin provides a few examples of the heterogeneity (81) of the speech genres available.

Bakhtin distinguishes between primary (simple) and secondary (complex) (82) speech genres. The latter includes novels, poetry, drama, scientific treatises, etc. which arise in more developed and thus complex forms of cultural communication (primarily written). In the process of their formation, they absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres (82) which in turn are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones (82), losing their immediate relation to actual reality (82). The boundaries of concrete utterance are determined by a change of speaking subjects (82). Whether a short rejoinder or a novel, each utterance has an absolute beginning and an absolute end: its beginning is preceded by the utterances of others, and its end is followed by the responsive utterances of others (82), silent or not. The change of speaking subjects acquires different forms in the heterogeneous spheres of human activity (82) as, for example, in the case of the alternation of interlocutors in simple everyday dialogue. Bakhtin posits that the nature of the relationship linking one rejoinder to another (e.g. a question followed by an answer, order and execution, etc.) is different from that which links various units of language either synchronically (i.e. the relations of difference linking signs within the sign system) or diachronically (i.e. the grammatical relations which link the successive units that comprise an utterance). He argues that, in fact, the relations between particular rejoinders are only subcategories of specific relations among whole utterances in the process of speech communication (83). Such relations are possible among the utterance of different speaking subjects and, as such, presuppose *other* (with respect to the speaker) participants in speech communication (83).

Bakhtin then turns his attention to the stable generic forms (83) which necessarily inform each speech act. Each speaker has a speech will (83) manifested in the choice of a particular genre (83). This choice is determined by the specific nature of the given sphere of speech communication, semantic (thematic) considerations, the concrete situation of the speech communication, the personal composition of its participants, etc. (83). The speaker's speech plan with all its individuality and subjectivity is applied and adapted to a chosen genre, it is shaped and developed within a certain generic form (83). It is impossible to speak or write outside of such genres. We acquire them in the process of acquiring our native language, mastering them before we master the elements of grammar, ingesting them from the concrete utterances to which we are exposed. The forms of language and the typical forms of utterances, that is, speech genres, enter our experience and our consciousness together, and in close connection with each other (84). To learn to speak means to learn to construct utterances (because we speak in utterances and not in individual sentences, and, of course, not in individual words (84) as a result of which speech genres organise our speech in almost the same way as grammatical (syntactical) forms do (84). Were this not the case and if we had to originate genres from scratch each time, speech communication would be almost impossible. The existence of such genres is borne out by the fact that some articulate, well-educated people find it difficult on certain occasions to express themselves: this is because they lack familiarity with the requisite genres.

Utterances are distinguished by several characteristics. Firstly, its relation to a speaker and other participants in speech communication. Bakhtin suggests that words and sentences possess individual, iterable meaning, that is, most of the time the members of a given speech community can

know the basic meaning of a word no matter what the particular context in which it is actually used. Words and sentences in this abstract sense have no relation to a specific individual and, thus, can claim no author. However, the utterance has a theme when it is used by someone in specific contexts. That is, a word or a sentence or several sentences become(s) an utterance once used by a speaker in anticipation of a rejoinder of some sort. An utterance always implies both a speaking subject (author) and a listener / reader. Secondly, given that each speaker is located in one referentially semantic sphere or another (84), each utterance is characterised by a particular referentially semantic content (84) or perspective on reality.

Thirdly, this content is determined by the expressive aspect (85) of the utterance, the speaking subject's subjective emotional evaluation of the referentially semantic content (85) in question. There is no such thing as a absolutely neutral (85) utterance. The speaker's evaluative attitude towards his subject (85) determines his / her lexical, grammatical, and compositional choices. This expressiveness is not a property of the linguistic units themselves but is imparted to them by the person using them through the use of a particular speech genre: it is either typical generic expression or it is an echo of another's individual expression, which makes the word . . . representative of another's whole utterance from a particular evaluative position (85). All this is complicated by the fact that each utterance is a link in a chain of speech communication, the boundaries of each being determined by a change in speaking subject. From this point of view, utterances are not self-sufficient: they are aware of and mutually reflect one other (85), reflections that determine their specific nature: each utterance

is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication. Every utterance must be regarded as a *response* to preceding utterances of the given sphere. . . . Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account. After all, as regards a given question, in a given matter, and so forth, the utterance occupies a particular *definite* position in a given sphere of communication. It is impossible to determine its position without correlating it with other positions. Therefore, each utterance is filled with various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given sphere of communication. These reactions take various forms: others' utterances can be introduced directly into the context of the utterance, or one may introduce only individual words or sentences, which then act as representatives of the whole utterance. Both whole utterances and individual words can retain their alien expression, but they can also be reaccentuated (ironically, indignantly, reverently, and so forth). Others' utterances can be repeated with various degrees of reinterpretation. They can be referred to as though the interlocutor were already well aware of them; they can be silently presupposed; or one's responsive reaction to them can be reflected only in the expression of one's speech--in the selection of language means and intonations that are determined not by the topic of one's own speech but the other's utterances concerning the same topic. (85-86)

All in all, the expression of an utterance can never be fully understood or explained if its thematic content is all that is taken into account. The expression of an utterance always *responds* to a greater or lesser degree, that is, it expresses the speaker's attitude towards others' utterances and not just his attitude toward the object of his utterance (86). However monological it may appear to be, it cannot but be, in some measure, a response to what has already been said about the given topic, on the given issue (86). Even though this responsiveness may not have assumed a clear-cut external expression (86), it may be manifested in the overtones of style, in the finest nuances of expression (86). Each utterance is filled with, at the very least, dialogic overtones (86) precisely because our thought itself--philosophical, scientific, and artistic--is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well (86). This is why any utterance is *multiplanar* (86) in that it necessarily reveals, upon closer inspection, many half-concealed or completely concealed words of others with varying degrees of foreignness (86). Bakhtin stresses that he has in mind in this respect not only preceding but subsequent utterances in the chain of communication, that is, the anticipated responses of other speakers. One of the essential characteristics of the utterance is its *addressivity* (87), the fact that the utterance has not only an author

but also a determinate (a more or less differentiated individual or group) or indeterminate (an undifferentiated individual or group) addressee. From the start, each utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions (87).