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The Social Nature of Words: Voices, Dialogues, Quarrels

Nancy Mack

Introduction

Composition theorists have recently become interested in the social aspects of language. Notably, many of us have been utilizing collaborative writing in our classrooms as an excellent tool for emphasizing the social context of writing. However, this new emphasis on creating a social context for writing often overlooks the fact that language is itself a social phenomenon. It is as if we have suddenly decided to make composition social—to drag composition, kicking and screaming against its individualistic will, into a social situation.

Others would argue that this current emphasis on the social aspects of language is nothing new because the consideration of audience, most certainly a social concept, is in fact as old as classical rhetoric. It is true that in virtually every composition textbook there is a discussion of audience, but the concept of audience is still externalized from language. Audience sits apart from language, signifying the group to whom language is directed. At best, audience only influences word choice as a fictitious group, conjured up by the writer while composing.

Perhaps a point should be made about one of the most significant works on audience awareness in this country, that done by Linda Flower, a recent Braddock Award winner. In another essay, Flower uses the notion of inner speech from Vygotsky in order to create the concepts of writer-based and reader-based prose. Linda Flower has much to offer with these concepts, but I am concerned that her work is used to explain away remedial writers as a most egocentric group who cannot seem to escape their antisocial position in writer-based prose. This type of thinking is more in concert with the work of Piaget, who views language development as a process of moving from the egocentric to the social, than it is in concert with the work of Vygotsky, who argues that inner speech is an internalized activity which originates as an external social act.

This particular example merely demonstrates a fundamental Western world view that language begins in the isolated individual and only later moves outward to become social.
In this article I will consider the social nature of language and then apply it to the composition classroom, demonstrating how the composition teacher's conception of language influences the student's position of power.

The Voices within Words

Much like Linda Flower's article which I mentioned above, I wish to ground my theoretical points in the work of a Soviet scholar. However, I will be using not only the isolated concepts of this author but the entire world view of language from which his scholarship has sprung. Additionally, I have chosen a scholar with a similar world view to Vygotsky's. I am referring to Mikhail Bakhtin and his seminal works, The Dialogic Imagination and Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (the latter of which was written under the name of Voloynov).

Bakhtin would probably view our gallant efforts to make language social as interesting, but hardly necessary. For it is ludicrous to believe that we make language social only from the outside when we place it in a social context. Instead, language presents itself to us as a social phenomenon from the inside, through and through, from its very essence. To quote Bakhtin from the first paragraph in "Discourse in the Novel": "[D]iscourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning" (Bakhtin 259). Bakhtin uses this particular essay to explicate how language is social in its form, function, and content. Bakhtin is most clear about the social nature of language when he focuses his discussion on the individual word. As Bakhtin tells us, the word does not come to us from the dictionary, virginal, without ever being used by others. Instead the word is worldly-wise from its contact with others. It existed first in the mouths of others (Bakhtin 279, 293-294). The word is never naive, never pure, never sanitized from its former usages.

This contamination image, however negative it may be, stresses that the word is populated by the other before we have a chance to speak it. In another passage, Bakhtin uses what some may view as a more positive image to describe the other within the word. Bakhtin describes the word as being surrounded by a background of voices (Bakhtin 278). To extend this metaphor further, as I selected voices for this article, I was aware of the voices which haunt my words—the voices of scholars, colleagues, students, and family. It is over this incredible din that I must speak. But as Bakhtin points out, without the presence of other voices for a background, my voice does not have a sound. I should be thankful that these voices have spoken meaning into the word, for without meaning the word that I wish to speak does not exist. Although these voices are social because they represent an other, they are not conceived of as an other external from me. These voices are now an internal other, within my head inside of the word, and they begin to reverberate whenever I start to use the word for any purpose. Thus, my head is filled with the echoes of an almost unimaginable number of voices.

The Voices Carry on a Dialogue

The idea of voices is an important one, for after understanding the concept of voices within the word, it then becomes possible to imagine these voices in dialogue with one another. Bakhtin puts this cacophony in slow motion to demonstrate how a word traverses toward an object. In its travels the word encounters alien words about the object that force it into dialogue. These alien words exert their influence over the word and forever alter its meaning, style, and tone. This dialogue is so important that it can even change the way that the word conceptualizes the object. In Bakhtin's words:

"The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own in a dialogic way" (Bakhtin 279).

For instance, I may wish to send a word out to name a person of another race. As I move forward to select a word, there are already many other words there which were spoken by other voices. These voices are not ignorant of one another; they begin a dialogue which influences how I conceive of this person of another race. I may see this person as an ethnic member, as a color, as a nation, as a language, as a mountain range; or as a food by conceptualizing that person with the corresponding words: "Negro" (an ethnic member), "Black" (a color), "Mexican American" (a nation), "Spanish" (a language), "Caucasian" (a mountain range), or "White Bread" (a food—"White Bread" is a derogatory word sometimes used to describe white people). I agree with Jesse Jackson and William Raspberry that it matters very much what we call ourselves. Words do create our conception of ourselves. For Bakhtin the social quality of this dialogue within language is primary; it influences everything related to language: perceptions, consciousness, and personally.

A Dialogue in Conflict

One big problem with using the word "dialogue" today is that the alien words which surround it are so strongly charged with a concilia-
It is these very changes that measure the racing life blood, the pulse, of a living language. Hiding these changes from our students will not make social class conflicts go away. Issues related to sexist language cause conflict, a conflict that is manifested in the squabble over "a lawyer, he" and "a housekeeper, she." Downplaying the conflict over third person pronoun choice will not change the economic disparity between men and women. Likewise, corporations shape our language in ways that may not at first seem to be in conflict; for instance fast food restaurants can decide to change the spelling of "through" in "drive through" to "thru" in order to shorten the word and thus save businesses like McDonalds incalculable millions. Even the decision among some to overlook the Latin insistence that infinitives cannot be split reveals some rumblings between the ivory tower and the street. In particular, this type of conflict, between the masses and the elite, is viewed by many in academe as a siege, causing worry about the stability of language in particular and Western culture in general. What I am suggesting here is that changes in language initiated by the masses should not be condemned wholesale but rather examined for their material basis. Language changes can become the text for learning about social class for the students and even more importantly for the teacher. As teachers, we need to consider why some phrases and usages come into favor. Why "TGIF," "take this job and shove it;" "Mushfake" means to make do with something less when the real thing is not available. So when prison inmates make hats from underwear to protect their hair from lice, the hats are mushfake. Elaborate craft items made from used wooden match sticks are another example of mushfake. In much the same meaning, sex acts with members of the same sex can be mushfake if one is just making do because...
the real thing is unavailable. Of course, this is not to say that there are
not homosexuals in prison but that the men in prison view sex acts as
homosexual or misstep depending upon the motives of the individ-
ual. Among all groups there are words and phrases that grow in popu-
larly in direct relationship to the material lives of the group's members.

Social Class and the Composition Classroom

Composition teachers are quite good at ignoring the material basis of
the non-elite students in their classroom. In a recent article in College
English Linda Brodkey gives insight about how this happens with both
content and language. She powerfully relates how a pen-pal situation
between well-meaning graduate students and GED students resulted in
the denial of the GED students' material reality. The GED students soon
can't escape the 'powerless in the face of language'. As teachers pay at-
tention to the meaningfulness of an utterance and not to its correctness
unless, of course, there is some ideological benefit to be gained by
stressing the surface features of a language. Bakhtin labels language
that is removed from its intentions as a "naked corpse" the direct oppo-
site of the living, dialogic word (Bakhtin 292).

For Bakhtin there is a clear distinction between a living and a dead
language. A living language is one that views the vital, contradictory
forces of change as a process of becoming while a dead language treats
language as a perfected, ready-made, ahistorical thing that can be
brought down from one generation to another (Volosinov 81). By
attempting to protect language from change, composition teachers take
a stand in favor of the death of death. In order to remain vital, lan-
guage needs the tension of alien words which respond to an unfolding,
ever-changing, material context. Consequently, the academy needs
opposition in order to keep language from dying. The academy should
not overlook important sources of vital language, the material life of the
street. Bakhtin revealed in the language of the lower class. He privileged
the notion of carnival. He made use of the lively play with languages in
the street, on the stages of local fairs and bullfroil spectacles through
drum songs, folk sayings, and anecdotes (Bakhtin 273). Bakhtin classi-
fies the language of the street as one of the decentralizing forces of lan-
guage, a centrifugal force that works against the centrifetal or stabiliz-
ing forces. These dialectical forces are necessary opposites whose
interaction creates the vitality of a living language.

Unlike the traditional composition teacher, Bakhtin describes a good
prose writer as a person who welcomes the heteroglossia of language.
He would probably view the composition teacher's efforts to still the
heteroglossia of language as humorous, if not totally impossible.
Bakhtin classifies heteroglossia as an asset for a writer. He describes
how it is through heteroglossia that the writer makes use of the diversity
of language, both literary and extraliterary. Writers are portrayed as
striving to intensify rather than weaken the heteroglossia so that they
can construct their own style (Bakhtin 298). Unlike those who do not
welcome lower class students into the university, I believe that there is
much to be learned from their use of language.

Is it possible to make room for the heteroglossia of language in aca-
demia? Certainly, we have already welcomed the influence of many
other languages such as French, Greek, and Latin. James Baldwin has
pointed out many influences of Black language through such words as
"jazz," "beat," and "funk." It might be argued that when using heteroglossia
of language, but this use is largely unintentional. Ironically, the lan-
guage of the academy is itself a heteroglot in far more complex ways than my examples imply; however, the problem is
that the academy conceives of its language monologically. Recognizing
that its language is a heteroglot would be the first step toward accepting
the students' language. If we progress even further and not just admit
heteroglossia but welcome it as Bakhtin suggests, we could find ways to
adopt useful features of street language into academic language. For
example, I do not believe that my dry academic article has suffered from
my use of language from several social groups.

Even more important than accepting the language of our students as
a vital part of the necessary changes in language, composition teachers
need to show students how to precipitate these language changes
through their appropriation of language. Bakhtin reminds us that we do
not passively use language; we give it meaning by voicing the intention of
our socially determined interests. In this way any social group can
appropriate language for its purposes. This changes the role of the
writer from a passive consumer of language to an active producer of

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change. Once again I will use my own writing to serve as an example of this point. At one time I had appropriated the word “empowerment” as a word of importance to my writing. I used “empowerment” to mean the liberatory acquisition of literacy as opposed to language learning that fosters the domination of the lower class. Now I am disenchanted with this word because of the alien voices of the current administration who wish to place their meanings into the word “empowerment,” using it in some terribly ironic twist to justify the withdrawal of social programs. Bakhtin suggests that all living ideological signs have the two faces of Janus so that any praise word can become a curse word and vice versa, especially in moments of social crisis (Volosinov 23). Moreover, in this article I intend to appropriate the word “democracy” to give voice to my meanings. I do not wish to accept the dominant concept of “democracy” as a form of government that offers but seldom delivers equality. Instead, I wish to make “democracy” mean a just and fair society that welcomes the heteroglossia of a living language. This “democratic” use of language makes room for the composition students from lower social classes to do just as I have attempted—to appropriate language in order to make changes, changes which will foster a more fair and just society.

In the democratic composition classroom, a social model of language is presented. This model admits to changes in the language: changes in the past, in the present, and better yet in the future; changes that are responsive to the material world of its social groups; and changes that reveal the struggles of various social classes to gain power. Students discuss these changes and are encouraged to appropriate language for their own purposes—to make changes, democratic changes, that will serve their liberation rather than their domination. The students’ language is no longer punished or mocked in workbook usage drills. Language is offered primarily as a means for power with which to validate one’s material life and hopefully as a means to change the world.

The social model of language differs from an asocial model in that it creates a more powerful position for students in relation to language. However, the social model of language is not blind to the fact that the language of the academy is the language of the dominant power group. Certainly, an important task in both types of composition classrooms is that of learning the language of the academy. The difference is that the democratic classroom does not promote language learning in order to make the students subservient to the academy but in order to make the academy more democratic.

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Works Cited


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