

Two Functions of Social Discourse: From Lope de Vega to Miguel de Cervantes

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At the inevitable risk of oversimplification, I propose to approach as directly as possible a broad and complex question: how are we to view in an orderly way the many different social functions of language, both oral and written? I will begin with the premise that oral language, analyzed abstractly by structuralists as a “semiotic system,” is more concretely the human race’s characteristic and fundamental social institution; normally acquired within the primary context of the family, language makes it possible for families and schools and other social organizations to exist and to function, articulating themselves, perpetuating themselves and developing historically. Purely mechanical inventions, such as the wheel, seem not to depend on language; but human families, tribes, city-states, and nations both constitute and are constituted by their verbal discourse. And the invention of writing, the “technologizing of the word,” as it has been aptly characterized by Walter J. Ong, went hand in hand with an economic, social, and cultural revolution.

If, then, verbal discourse is in some sense coterminous with human society, what are language’s basic social functions? Perhaps we can use as a point of departure the famous debate between B. F. Skinner of Harvard and Noam Chomsky of M.I.T., the debate (crudely put) between, on the one hand, a behavioristic theory of language as a limited system of conditioned reflexes and, on the other, a creative theory of language as an open system of almost infinite syntactic possibilities. According to Skinner, language—or, rather, “verbal behavior,” which in its covert form includes what we normally call “thought” —is simply one complicated example of operant conditioning: the human child, like Pavlov’s dog salivating at the sound of an electric gong associated with meat, learns to

salivate at the mention of the word for milk, and eventually to ask for it by name. Chomsky, on the other hand, emphasizes that the human user of language understands and produces new sentences that he or she has never heard or said before: human mind in language is thus no mere surface reflex, but has a deep structure that allows it to be original, productive of new meanings. (We university intellectuals, needless to say, tend to prefer Chomsky's view, which allows us to function meaningfully.)

I will not attempt here to deal with the debatable genetic and environmental hypotheses that underlie such metaphors as "deep structure" and "surface structure." The fact is that, phenomenologically, each of them—Skinner and Chomsky—seems to account for a different, real experience of language; and I submit that both these experiences of language must be taken seriously. Thus, those of us who teach foreign languages know that there is a basic function of language that can best be mastered by pattern drills: the phonology, the morphology, and a great deal of syntax may in fact be learned by rote, by operant conditioning. In everyday social usage there actually exist many set formulas:

Good morning, how are you today?
 Fine, thanks, how are you?
 Buenos días, ¿cómo está usted?
 Muy Bien, gracias, ¿y usted?

At this level Skinner seems to be right: the conditioned reflex is all there is to this kind of linguistic competence. But, at another level, Chomsky seems more appropriate. If, for example, someone asks me, "What does it mean to say "Good morning?"", I cannot simply respond with a ready-made answer, for I must first think more analytically about how sociolinguistic formulas function. Metalinguistic activity is itself an essential aspect of certain basic uses of language.

For a more comprehensive, socially oriented theory of language than those of Chomsky or Saussure, which are structural theories that tend to limit their object of study to single complete sentences as the maximum grammatical units, we must, I think, transcend structural linguistics altogether and turn toward what I will call sociolinguistics, in the broadest pragmatic sense of that word. I have in mind such works as the following, in which their authors try to explain how discourse, or a sequence of interrelated sentences and paragraphs, works socially: Eric Havelock's *Preface*

to Plato (1963), Walter J. Ong's *Presence of the Word* (1967), J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), William Labov's *Language of the Inner City* (1972), some of Emile Benveniste's *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (1966-74), Voloshinov's (or Bakhtin's) *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973), and Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). These different theorists pose some of the same basic questions concerning the social existence and social functions of the language, while using different points of departure: the alphabetic revolution in classical Greece, the religious function of audible language, performative speech acts, conversational narratives as display texts, language as the source of subjectivity, conversation as the grassroots matrix of a society's ideology, and of the novel. Despite their differences, it seems to me that they coincide in a remarkable degree of consensus. I will now attempt, in my own way, to synthesize this consensus, drawing freely on these and other writers. (In what follows, only I am responsible for the oversimplifications, and for any self-contradictions.)

I will begin again with the simple binary opposition suggested by Skinner and Chomsky, and will then sketch between these two poles a range or spectrum of differentiations. Thus Bakhtin, for example, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, develops the Hegelian opposition between epic poetry and the novel as an opposition between aristocratic monoglossia and popular heteroglossia; similarly, in his *Preface to Plato*, Havelock shows us how Plato's *Republic* deconstructs and replaces Homer's poetry, in much the same way, I would suggest, that Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote* deconstructs and supersedes romances of chivalry, and Lope de Vega's honor-code theater.

On the "monoglossic" extreme, we have the primitive oral community, without writing, a probably authoritarian tribal community that depends heavily on the recitation, from memory, of more or less fixed, highly privileged sequences of words, usually in verse and often set to music; these word-sequences tend to be used ritualistically, often as magical incantations in which the words seem simply to work, to convert two single persons, for example, into a married couple ("What God hath joined, let no man put asunder"), or to reenact some mythic or historic event. This sacramental view of language is aptly characterized in scholastic language by the concept of "verba efficientia," "words that do things"; it is clearly alluded to by Austin's own references

to the “outward and visible signs” of an “inward and spiritual act” (1975), words taken from the Anglican catechism. The speech act, whether rooted in the authority of God’s Word or in that of the community’s rules and conventions, tends to function *ex opere operato*, by public performance, regardless of secret or private intentions and subsequent behavior. Havelock has described this “pedagogic” function of the mimetic recitation of Homer’s poetry in preclassical Greece.

We should not think of this monoglossic, or univocal, function of language as something belonging only to an archaic, primitive past. Today, in twentieth-century America and elsewhere, ancient and modern texts still work in the same way, for many people at least. Margaret A. Doody has described what happens to her when she recites a sixteenth-century “General Confession” from the *Book of Common Prayer*. These are some of the words that she quotes:

We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness,
Which we from time to time most grievously have committed,
By thought, word, and deed, against thy Divine Majesty. Provoking
most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.

“The old forms. . . ,” she comments, “with their doublets of words and phrases, with the varied repetitions combined with the building up of clauses in a tension which has to be acknowledged by a slowing of pace, make an enactment which is something more than flat statement. . . . The speaker at the end is different from the speaker at the beginning” (1980:111-12). And, she says, “. . .there is a tradition, a view of human nature older than Romanticism and quite alien to modern notions of sincerity, according to which outer actions and words spoken can create the feelings and move the desires” (108).

Similarly, it seems to me, singing The *Star-Spangled Banner* at an American football game in front of the flag may well induce a transformation of the individual: putting one’s heart into it, as the saying goes, he or she may become once more a member of the patriotic football community by such a performance, by virtue of the rhymes and reasons of “the rockets’ red glare, and bombs bursting in air,” words that can work when sung, even though they may seem semantically irrelevant when analytically transcribed or

translated into a written text.

In Spanish literature the plays written by Lope de Vega constitute a sort of secular liturgy. *Fuenteovejuna*, for example, despite its revolutionary violence, is highly lyrical in its versification, appealing to the social ideals and wishful thinking of its audience, which easily identified with the romantic characters, the innocent pair of young country *fiancés*, threatened by the sexual abuses of the corrupt Comendador from the city. Ceremonious courtesy, with complimentary turns of poetic phrase, seems to induce harmonious social relations, with mutual congratulation for one another's honor. It is the breakdown of this ideal of courtesy that leads to rape and to rebellion against the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella. When the women of the village insult the men and murder the Comendador, the villagers are saved from punishment, and order is restored, by the quasi-magical word "Fuenteovejuna," repeated unanimously by everyone being interrogated under torture: it is an Austinian performative which the royal judge must finally accept as a *fait accompli*.

This, then, is the behavioristic, or perhaps Heideggerian, extreme of our spectrum of language's different social functions: we memorize traditional words, which, when repeated, quite simply do our thinking for us, by seeming to be the Truth. When I leave my girl-friend behind, I tell her that "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," and she replies, "Out of sight, out of mind": popular verbal culture supplies us in this way with countless clichés, allowing us to justify ourselves by citing their authority. And Georges Poulet is not far from this end of the spectrum when he describes what happens to us as we read a readerly text: we lose ourselves in it, we allow a traditional literary subjectivity to replace our own, and, as we read, we go thus quietly, even quixotically, mad (1970:57-62).

What is the other and opposite end of the spectrum? Here Bakhtin is extremely suggestive. In opposition to what he calls monoglossia—that is, the idealistic belief of a traditional ethnocentric culture that there is a single truth-bearing language (classical French, for example) that is totally unified in a synchronic, structural way—Bakhtin emphasizes what he finds to be the more immediate, materialistic, and primary reality of *parole* (not *langue*), of heteroglossia, of disparate utterances in different

social and geographical and historical dialects and vernaculars, utterances that are all trying to make sense to one another as, in dialogue, they tend toward the formation of new and different languages and ideologies for the future. For Bakhtin, as for Austin, utterances are primarily social acts; but whereas Austin emphasizes the conventional rules that constitute or govern such acts, Bakhtin finds in them radical ambiguity and ideological creativity, that is, the constant revision of conventional rules. To quote from the English translation of Voloshinov's, or Bakhtin's, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*: "In each speech act, subjective experience perishes in the objective fact of the enunciated word-utterance, and the enunciated word is subjectified in the act of responsive understanding in order to generate, sooner or later, a counter statement" (1973:40-41). This intersubjective process of producing socially objective language cannot, according to Bakhtin, be analyzed in the static grammatical or structural terms of monoglossia, but must be seen as a historical process of evaluative dialogue: this is Bakhtin's grass-roots matrix of ideological tendencies, tendencies which may become, it seems to me, eventually fossilized as monoglossic codes. But, in its historical context, each heteroglossic utterance is unique, provoking a different interaction between speaker and hearer. Bakhtin cites a passage from Dostoyevski in which the same vulgar word ("merde" in Russian, no doubt) is used by six different speakers with six different intonations and six different ideological evaluations, ranging from flat condemnations to high praise. And, in a more complex and humorous way, Cervantes has done something similar with the Spanish phrase "hi de puta" in *Don Quixote* (Part II, chapter 13).

Bakhtin's social concept of dialogue, or of an unending historical process that is both intersubjective and materially objectified in words, is basic to his theory of the novel as the constantly developing devourer of all established literary genres, including preceding novels. He praises the novel as the sort of literary discourse which, by his own definition, reveals the true heteroglossic nature of historically developing language and ideology; conversely, he seems to condemn epic poetry as the sort of literature that incarnates the false structural and monoglossic principle of fossilized language and anti-historical, utopian, synchronic authoritarianism.

But here I pose a question: can heteroglossia exist without monoglossia of some sort, to serve both as its point of departure and as its own tendency? It seems to me that the myth of a single unified language of truth not only makes epic poetry and ritualistic formulas possible, but is also necessary as a foil for mock epic, for parody of all sorts, for Rabelaisian carnival, and for the novel itself insofar as that language is essentially anti-monoglossic. We must at least temporarily indulge in the myth before we can deconstruct it.

Let us turn from this literary question to the broader question with which we began: the range of varying social functions of language in everyday use. No one can deny the real social existence of ritualistic formulas: if I say “thank you” to the check-out person as she or he tells me to have a nice day, and if we both understand one another and even feel better about our fleeting encounter after repeating these banal phrases, then monoglossia does have a real social function, and, I suspect, a universally important one. To sing *The Star-spangled Banner* is not the same thing as to have an intelligent dialogue; both of these verbal activities, however, are occasionally indulged in by the same American citizens. We must, I think, not only recognize the coexistence of monoglossia and heteroglossia, but also try to analyze further their productive interaction.

Some years ago the American sociolinguist Charles Ferguson invented a concept, which he called “diglossia,” to cover the complementary relationship in certain cultures between one classical written language and the different vernacular(s): in German Switzerland, for example, or in Haiti, a local dialect or creole is learned at home as the mother tongue, and another quite different standard written language is learned at school, not only for reading and writing, but also for speaking and listening, under certain more formal circumstances. In Bakhtin’s terms, the standard written language is more or less monoglossic, as the fixed vehicle of high official culture, while the spoken vernacular is more heteroglossic, as the varied and freely developing medium of everyday conversation. But even more profoundly heteroglossic is the interplay between both of them: this phenomenon is what Bakhtin finds to be particularly productive culturally in such a period as the Renaissance, which had a complex diglossia involving the humanists’ neoclassical Greek and Latin, the Church’s scholastic

and liturgical Latin, and the infinitely various vernaculars of different marketplaces and of nascent nations; Rabelais' carnival of languages is an objective-subjective interplay of all three of these complex registers.

Father Ong has described in terms strikingly similar to those of Bakhtin what happens in true dialogue (1982:176):

Human communication, verbal and other, differs from the "medium" model most basically in that it demands anticipated feedback in order to take place at all. In the medium model, the message is moved from sender-position to receiver-position. In real human communication, the sender has to be not only in the sender position but also in the receiver position before he or she can send anything.

As I approach my tentative conclusion, I would like to cite Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as the text within which the heteroglossic novel is first fully realized, with dialogue at many different levels. Its necessary monoglossic point of departure is of course the romance of chivalry, what Northrop Frye has called "the secular scripture": this archaic narrative code of heroic behavior, reinforced in Spain by the oral media of ballads and of Lope de Vega's popular theater, is what constitutes Don Quixote's madness when reenacted within the heteroglossic chronotope of modern roads and inns and palaces, where different social classes and literary idioms meet and mingle in dialogue. Cervantes' central dialogue is that of an archetypal comic pair: the tall, thin, ascetic, aristocratic landowner and reader of books, and the short, fat, guzzling, landless peasant, who can neither read nor write. These two characters, when they find themselves isolated as a pair on the road or in the woods, have endless meandering conversations, exploring each other's range of words, ideas, values. Initially the literate member of the pair seems to have all the advantages: his linguistic range includes not only his own Renaissance library, but many of the oral sayings and Latin quotations that Sancho Panza uses in a garbled way. But the illiterate representative of the lower classes eventually acquires control of his master's literary idiom and with it is able to convince Don Quixote that his lady Dulcinea is enchanted, apparently transformed into a smelly peasant girl, which had been in fact Dulcinea's flesh-and-blood

source. The affection and the struggle for control are both always comic, as is the apparently aimless process of conversation on such topics as which deed is greater: to kill a giant (the deed of a knight errant) or to raise someone from the dead (the deed of a saint). The growing dialogic area of overlap between the two characters provides a free play of heteroglossia, which reveals self-contradictions within the more or less official monoglossic codes of knightly honor and saintly virtue, of Don Quixote's Ciceronian, hypotactic prose and of Sancho Panza's popular, paratactic aphorisms. Without these monoglossic codes, I submit, the heteroglossia of the novel could not even have come into existence, much less come to an end in the recantation of Don Quixote, who writes his last will and testament in correct legal style before declaring his repentance and making his deathbed confession as a good Catholic.

The basis for our two functions of social discourse is no doubt the structure of the linguistic sign itself: a material "signifier" (whether phonetic, chirographic, typographic, or electromagnetic) associated in a problematic way with a more diffuse mental "signified" (subjective, intersubjective, lexicographic). The signifier, divorced from the signified, may be reproduced in a mechanical way, subject to the *lapsus linguae (calami)* of mnemonic (graphic) confusion: "Lead us not into Penn Station," says the little boy, allowing the acoustic substitution of one syllable for another to garble a sacred text. The association of sounds in oral formulas is a sort of writing, in Derrida's words, "avant la lettre": it makes possible the recitation of thousands of lines of poetry, without their necessarily deriving from any fixed sort of sense or personally intended meaning. But, when those lines are heard or read, they may well evoke a sense or meaning in the hearer or reader, even transforming him or her in some inner way; and, of course, the hearer may well be the same person as the reciter.

But what if one starts, not with the ready-made signifier, but with a more or less vague sense of meaning, of trying to say something to someone? One then searches for a word, a linguistic sign with some more or less appropriate signified, and, with the help of "anticipated feedback," eventually settles for a given signifier: within a given social context, or historical community, original human communication is in this way somehow possible.

And yet.. .

Words strain,

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. . . (*Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton," 150-54).

The world of historical time, of sociolinguistic process, does not permit, either for Bakhtin or for Eliot, any ultimate permanence of meaning.

In conclusion, I will assert again the necessary coexistence of varying degrees of monoglossia and heteroglossia in any culture or community or literary text: one function of language provides for the apparently univocal use of the same words by different people, and the other permits skeptical analysis of traditional formulas, equivocal explorations of new ideological possibilities, innovative social discourse, and the novelty of new novels.

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