

Bakhtin's conceptual contributions to changes in the boundaries of knowledge

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Boundary encounters take place everywhere in our modern world, not only across national borders, but in our neighbourhoods as well. To the Russian philosopher of culture, Mikhail M. Bakhtin, boundary encounters are essential in all creative cultural activity. In a text from the early 1920s, he asserts that a domain of culture should not be thought of as some kind of spatial whole, possessing not only boundaries but an inner territory. A cultural domain has no inner territory. It is located entirely on boundaries; boundaries intersect it everywhere, passing through each of its constituent features. The systematic unity of culture passes into the atoms of cultural life – like the sun, it is reflected in every drop of it. Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries, and it derives its seriousness and significance from this fact. Abstracted from these boundaries, it loses the ground of its being and becomes vacuous, arrogant, degenerates and dies (Bakhtin 2003:282–283, 1990:274).

Two concepts introduced into the humanities by Bakhtin – heteroglossia and heterochrony – will be approached here before returning to the one already introduced, boundary encounters. These concepts all have, I believe, an operational value in the study of social and cultural problems also independently of the functions they may have in Bakhtin's own contexts.

In order to understand Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia*, we have to bear in mind that he rejected the Saussurian opposition between *langue* as an abstract system and *parole* as the individual utterance or text. Language and culture may strive for unity and order, for instance in the development of national languages. The creation of such languages was an essential part of the nation-building process that took place in countries such as Norway, Finland, Greece and Turkey throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as in the Soviet Union since the early 1930s. But the concept of a thoroughly standardized language remains a political objective, not a linguistic fact.

Language as embodied and in use, spoken by people, is not unitary. There are always many ways of speaking, many “languages” and “speech genres,” reflecting the diversity of social experience. What these languages have in common, is that they are all “specific points of view on the world, forms of conceptualizing the

world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” (Bakhtin 1981:291–292).

Language is always *languages*, according to Bakhtin. *Heteroglossia*, therefore, may be studied *intralinguistically* – the official language of a society in opposition to social and geographical dialects, generational variations, professional idiom, etc. It may also be studied *interlinguistically*, since *polyglossia* and *heteroglossia*, as vital factors in our environment can no longer be overlooked, due to ever increasing cross-border communication and migration between countries and continents.

Most of us will have experienced the necessity of “code-switching,” i.e. using different languages according to when, where and to whom we are speaking: at home we speak one language, in the lecture room another, when we pray to God a third. These different languages are context-dependent and activated almost automatically by the different contexts.

In some respects, Bakhtin’s concept of *heteroglossia* comes close to the situation referred to in sociolinguistics as *diglossia*, where there are two (often closely related) languages, one of high prestige, which is generally used by the government and in formal texts, and one of low prestige, which is usually the spoken, vernacular tongue.

In addition, Bakhtin also speaks of “dialogized heteroglossia,” a form of discourse when the speaker is capable of regarding “one language through the eyes of another language” (Bakhtin 1981:296). When this happens, the value systems and worldviews in these languages come to interact; they “interanimate” each other as they enter into dialogue. The discourse is no longer single-voiced, but has become double- or multi-voiced, either passively reproducing other words and voices, or actively in various degrees of dialogized speech, which is, according to Valentin Voloshinov’s formulation, which may also be Bakhtin’s: “speech within speech, and at the same time also *speech about speech, utterance about utterance*” (Voloshinov 1973:115).

Heterochrony is a concept that describes an essential aspect of our globalized world. Neither historically, philosophically, religiously nor anthropologically can this world be described exclusively in terms of a linear development from “primitive” to progressively higher stages, with our Western civilisation as the highest so far. The pluralistic world in which we live can no longer be seen solely from this perspective. What happens to our research when we realize that different kinds of time and time-spaces co-exist and are at work simultaneously, globally as well as in our proximity?

Already Herder, in his metacritique of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, maintained that time is not always only a formal, a priori condition of all phenomena, but that there is a plurality of times: *Properly speaking, any changeable object contains the measure of its time within itself; it exists even if there were no other one; no two things in the world share the same measure of time. [...] At one time, there exist (one can say it truly and boldly) countless many times in the universe*” (Herder as quoted in Koselleck 2002:111).

According to Koselleck, the “uncovering or discovery of such subjective historical time” is “in itself a product of modernity” (Koselleck 2002:110–111). Fernand Braudel, the prominent leader of the Annales School of historiography,

criticizes traditional narrative historians for overlooking “the multiplicity of time” as well as “the plurality of historical time” (Braudel 1980:27, 89).

When Bakhtin formulated his concept of *heterochronicity* (*raznovremen-nost'*), he was inspired not by Herder but by Goethe. In his essay on “Time and space in Goethe’s works,” Bakhtin claims that Goethe did not recognize simple spatial contiguities or the simple coexistence of things and phenomena. Behind each static heteromorphism he saw heterochronicity: for him diversity was distributed in various stages (epochs) of development, that is, it acquired a temporal meaning. [...]

The simple spatial contiguity (*nebeneinander*) of phenomena was profoundly alien to Goethe, so he saturated and imbued it with *time*, revealed emergence and development in it, and distributed that which was contiguous in *space* in various *temporal* stages, epochs of becoming. For him contemporaneity – both in nature and in human life – is revealed as an essential heterochronicity: as remnants or relics of various stages and formations of the past and as rudiments of stages in the more or less distant future (Bakhtin 1979:208).

In a much later text, “Response to a Question by the Novyi mir Editorial Staff” (Otvét na vopros redaktsii ‘Novogo mira’), Bakhtin insists on the importance of *outsidedness* (*vnenakhodimost'*) for all *creative understanding*. “There exists” – he writes – “a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order to better understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one’s own.”

This is only one side of the matter, however. In order to understand a culture creatively, he continues, “it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, space, in culture.”

In the domain of culture, outsidedness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only with the eyes of *another* culture that a foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly (but not maximally fully, because there will be cultures that see and understand even more). A meaning only reveals its depths when it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us new aspects and new semantic depths. Without *one’s own* questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign (but, of course, the questions must be serious and sincere). Such a dialogic relationship of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched (Bakhtin 2003:282–283, 1990:274).

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