

Dialogism

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1 Definition

The term “dialogism” is most commonly used to denote the quality of an instance of discourse that explicitly acknowledges that it is defined by its relationship to other instances, both past, to which it responds, and future, whose response it anticipates. The positive connotations of dialogism are often reinforced by a contrast with “monologism,” denoting the refusal of discourse to acknowledge its relational constitution and its misrecognition of itself as independent and unquestionably authoritative.

2 Explication

Dialogism is overwhelmingly associated in accounts of literary theory in general, and of narratology in particular (e.g. Prince [1987] 2003: 19–20; Phelan 2005; Williams 2005), with the work of the Russian thinker Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle. Although Bakhtin first used the words *dialogizm* and *dialogičnost'* (literally “dialogicality” or “dialogical quality”) in his [1929] 2000 study of Dostoevskij, the *locus classicus* of his understanding of dialogism is found in his [1934/35] 1981 essay “Slovo v romane,” translated as “Discourse in the Novel”:

Directed toward its object, a word enters a dialogically agitated and tense environment of alien words, evaluations and accents, is woven into their complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may in an essential manner shape the word, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile. / The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of the utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. Indeed, the utterance

arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the object from the sidelines (Baxtin [1934/35] 1981: 276–77; translation modified).

This extended quotation brings together many of the principal features—utterance, evaluation, accent, social dialogue—associated with the Baxtinian account of dialogism; other terms from the essay that have gained widespread currency as denotations of discourse encapsulating social dialogue include “hybridized” and “double-voiced.” As the title of the essay suggests, for Baxtin the most effective means of representing the inherently dialogic quality of discourse is the novel; in turn, it is the polyphonic novel, exemplified most completely by the works of Dostoevskij, that is the acme of the novelist’s “orchestration” of *raznorečie* (usually translated as heteroglossia (Tjupa → Heteroglossia [1]), the diversity of socially specific discourses; Baxtin [1929] 2000, [1963] 1984). Baxtin’s promotion of the novel relies to a large extent on a contrast between prose as dialogic and epic and poetry as monologic, an opposition that is clearly unsustainable if all discourse is indeed inherently dialogic: monologic discourse (whether in poetry, epic or in any other medium or genre) can, in Baxtin’s terms, only be dialogic discourse that misrecognizes or misreads, wilfully or otherwise, its own relationship to other discourse in order to present itself as authoritative.

3 History of the Concept and its Study

Not only is dialogism predominantly associated with Baxtin, but it has become for many a convenient denotation of the whole tenor of his work, shorthand for a theoretical position that, although refined and rearticulated over the course of decades, remained in essence unchanged, accounting for the Russian thinker’s originality. In large measure, this over-simplification of Baxtin’s intellectual biography is a consequence of his coming to prominence in the Soviet Union, after decades of provincial obscurity, towards the end of his life, and indeed in the years after his death, and therefore also of the circumstances in which he became well known elsewhere. The collection *The Dialogic Imagination* is symptomatic: its title, furnished by its translators (and impossible to render convincingly in Russian), lends the dialogic a particular prominence and allure and exemplifies the translation’s anachronistic alignment of Baxtin’s texts with the alien time and place of the 1980s theory boom, allowing them to appear to offer an unusually sophisticated, grounded and user-friendly version of positions associated with poststructuralism. The effect, perhaps unavoidable at the time, was to mask the resonances of many of Baxtin’s texts (already obscured by his Russian editors’ excision of a large number of his references) with the philosophical and philological traditions with which they

engaged. Recent work has uncovered the extent to which Baxtin's interest in the novel was driven less by literary-critical concerns than by a philosophical agenda that draws on the work of a range of thinkers including Bergson, Cassirer, Misch, Vossler, Lukács and Mixajlovskij, and that is marked by simultaneous adherence to contradictory neo-Kantian and Hegelian principles (Brandist 2002: esp. 120–32; Tihanov 2000). Furthermore, the account of discourse that is part of this philosophical project is likewise crucially dependent on the work of others. It was largely thanks to Vološinov and Medvedev, until recently consistently misrepresented as mere acolytes of Baxtin, but now recognized as important figures in their own right, whose own interests were in significant measure shaped by their participation in the research programmes of the academic institutions where they worked, that Baxtin underwent in the late 1920s the “linguistic turn” (Hirschkop 2001) that allowed dialogue and the dialogic to assume such importance in his works of the 1930s. In particular, Vološinov's account of discursive interaction (Vološinov [1926] 1983, [1929] 1973), which drew on, *inter alia*, the work of the linguist Jakubinskij ([1923] 1997), Brentanian psychology, Bühler's “organon model” of communication, *Gestalt* theory, and Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, was a precondition for the dialogic theory of the utterance that usually but misleadingly bears Baxtin's name. Overall, it is essential to recognize that a number of key terms and concepts for which Baxtin tends to be given the sole or principal credit are in fact products and properties of the contexts in which he worked, and of the traditions to which he was, both directly and indirectly, affiliated. Perhaps the most notable instance, apart from dialogism itself, is the concept that underpins it, heteroglossia, the word usually used (although more accurate and appropriate would be “heterology”) to translate the Russian term *raznorečie* that is often considered a Baxtinian neologism, but that was in fact widely employed by contemporaneous linguists (Zbinden 1999; Brandist 2003; Shepherd 2005).

3.1 Relevance for Narratology

If the account of dialogic discourse associated with Baxtin has proved attractive, this may be because it enables detailed description of aspects of fictional narrative such as point of view (Niederhoff → Perspective - Point of View [2]) and voice (Brian McHale → Speech Representation [3]) to be combined with reference to factors social and ideological, thereby offering apparent cover against accusations of arid narratological neglect of the referent. However, it has also been subject to misinterpretation as a relativistic rather than relational model, a sustained plea that we should always see all sides of an argument, or that “faced with a choice of competing interpretations we must always choose both” (Booker & Juraga 1995: 16). In large measure, the ease with which dialogism has been appropriated as a tool for (not only) literary analysis, and the blunting of this tool by casual use, are

consequences of a failure to recognize and engage with the concept's place in intellectual history, with the philosophical and philological contexts in which dialogism denotes not an identifiable quality of a narrative text, but a set of problems in the study of human language, communication and cognition (Linell 1998).

The implication of all this would appear to be not so much that dialogism is not relevant for narratology, but that there is a mismatch between the complexities of understanding dialogism in historical perspective on the one hand, and on the other narratology's apparent requirement for an instrument enabling more or less objective description and analysis of certain properties of narrative texts and their effects. But to assert this would be to disregard the prospect that theory describable as "dialogic" does hold out of a sensitive and sophisticated approach, firmly anchored in an account of the concrete institutions in which fiction is produced and consumed, to questions of authorial, narratorial and readerly agency and interdependence—in Prince's terms, the "elaboration of an explicit, complete, and empirically grounded model of narrative accounting for narrative competence (the ability to produce narratives and to process texts as narratives) [that] ultimately constitutes the most significant narratological endeavor" (2003: 12). It would also be to disparage unduly the achievements and, especially, potential of narratology, not least in what Nünning (2003) describes as the "postclassical" phase in which it seeks to move beyond structuralist typologization (Herman 1999).

4 Topics for Further Investigation

(a) The precise relationship between dialogism and other terms used to denote modes of representing point of view (focalization, free indirect discourse, polyphony, etc.; an excellent beginning to this investigation is offered by Lock 2001). (b) The implications of the philosophical and philological lineage of dialogism for the project of narratology (this is simply one expression of the broader question of the extent to which literary/critical theory does or does not recognize its historical affiliations). Is dialogism a solution to a (narratological) problem, or a convenient denotation of a set of complex (philosophical and linguistic) problems in search of a solution?

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