

The concepts of *voice*, *heteroglossia* and *polyphony* in literature, sociology and linguistics: An SFL perspective.

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In the fields of literature, sociology and linguistics the term *voice* has been used to refer to the characteristic discourse of individuals or social groupings of different orders. However, despite this use of a common term, the concepts referred to seem to differ significantly while, conversely, a different label is used to refer to seemingly similar concepts. For example, Hymes (1996:64), whose theorisation of *voice* is central within sociolinguistics, uses the term to refer to the distinctive speech patterns of minoritised communities, a concept he further develops under the label of *ethnopoetics*. For Hymes the conception of *voice* is an extension of Whorfian linguistic relativity, but for this second type of linguistic relativity, the *relativity of function*, what are disclosed in the distinctive speech patterns of a community are not different experiences of the physical world, as with Whorf, but the social:

...not orientations towards space, time, vibratory phenomena and the like, but orientations towards persons, roles, statuses, rights and duties, deference and demeanour...

Hymes 1996:45

At first blush, this seems rather different from the definition developed at roughly the same time by Bernstein, working within the field of sociology. For Bernstein (2000:12), *voice* is the limit of what can legitimately be said within any discourse, the classification and legitimation of which are imposed from above. Bernstein labels as the *message* the framing of *voice* in practice, in other words the specific features of language as used in a particular instance in context, a concept which seems closer to Hymes's concept of *voice*.

However, common ground with Bernstein's conception of legitimate discourse (though from the opposite direction) can be seen in Hymes's (1996:64) further description of *voice* as:

...a kind of negative freedom, freedom from denial of opportunity due to something linguistic, whether in speaking or reading or writing... [and conversely] ...a kind of positive freedom, freedom for satisfaction in the use of language, for language to be a source of imaginative life and satisfying form. In my own mind I would unite the two kinds of freedom in the notion of *voice*: freedom to have one's voice heard, freedom to develop a voice worth hearing.

This is a formulation taken up and developed by Blommaert in the context of mass migration and the superdiversity of post-capitalist linguistic communities. In a nutshell, Blommaert (2005:255) defines voice in such contexts as "the capacity to make oneself understood", a summation which seems to diverge from Hymes's original formulation. However, in further defining the concept Blommaert brings us back towards Hymes's notion of *relativity of function* when he states (Blommaert 2005:69) that:

...voice in the era of globalisation becomes a matter of the capacity to *accomplish functions of linguistic resources translocally*, across different physical and social spaces. Voice in other words is *the capacity for semiotic mobility...*"

And this formulation takes us back to the origins of *voice* as a concept and the corresponding notions of *heteroglossia* and *polyphony* as they were developed early twentieth century Russian literary criticism. For Bakhtin (1981 [1930s]), there are many varieties within a single language, corresponding to different social groupings, and *heteroglossia* is the use of another's voice "serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (Bakhtin 1981:324, while *polyphony* refers to the multifractal coherence that is achieved through the representation of multiple voices and worldviews within a single text (Bartlett 2012:14).

In this paper I examine the concepts of *voice*, *heteroglossia* and *polyphony* from within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics and address the following questions:

- Can the various conceptions of *voice* be brought together in a unitary framework?
- Does the concept of *voice* hold within a multicultural and polycentric society?
- What are the distinctive linguistic features of the *voices* of different social groupings?
- Do the concepts of *voice* and *superdiversity* challenge the SFL concept of a unitary though diversified *context of culture*?
- Can SFL contribute to questions of linguistic legitimation through a recognition of *heteroglossia* and the coherence of *polyphonic* discourse?

References

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