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


