

ON BERTAU'S AND OTHER VOICES

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ABSTRACT. In this short commentary on Bertau's paper, notions of voice are discussed. In particular, the following aspects are in focus: materiality, personal identity and perspectivity.

”What would be worst, the discovery of a new nose on you or the discovery of a new voice from within you?” (Anward, 2002, p. 134)

Most words in natural languages are polysemic; they have meaning potentials which, in combination with contextual factors, can give rise to many situated meanings. The term ‘voice’ and its counterparts in other languages are no exceptions. In the everyday usage of many languages, words for ‘voice’, such as Russian *golos*, German *Stimme*, Swedish *röst* or Finnish *ääni*, can mean both ‘the sounds carrying a person's speech’ and ‘the person's expression of views and opinions’, also as expressed in political elections and the like (the verbs *golosovat'*, *stimmen*, *rösta* and *äänestää*, in the respective languages, all mean ‘to vote’). There are of course many other subsenses, but the two of ‘physical sounding of one's speech’ and ‘opinion/view/perspective’ recur in many more languages. They are also part of the scholarly analysis of the concepts associated with the term ‘voice’.

Marie-Cécile Bertau (2007, this issue) discusses many aspects of ‘voice’, mainly in psychodynamic, psycholinguistic and dialogical perspectives. The introduction takes its point of departure in ‘dialogical self theory’ and the idea of I-positions, but Bertau then goes back to the writings of Voloshinov and Bakhtin, and other members or predecessors of the Bakhtin circle. The main bulk of the text is about the child's acquisition of voices, in a psycholinguistic perspective. I shall use this opportunity to summarise some insights, most of which are expressed by Bertau, but I will do so in my own words. (Actually, these words are of course not my own at all, as every dialogist will understand.)

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When Bakhtin and particularly Voloshinov developed their “theory of the utterance,” which revolves very much around the concept of voice, they started out from formal linguistics of the time, with its abstract conception of language. The formalists were “monologists”, who promoted a picture of languages as systems of abstract, impersonal and immaterial signs, as structures existing over and above individuals. By contrast, Voloshinov (1929/1986) and Bakhtin argued that languages live only in and through the mouths of real people, in utterances. Utterances in talk are always carried by individual voices. Hence, we should think of languaging in terms of material(ised) (embodied, personalised) words, a view which has later been expressed by other dialogically minded scholars (Silverman & Torode, 1980). To simplify matters considerably, I suggest that the concept of voice involves at least three important dimensions: (a) material or physical embodiment (of utterances), (b) personal signature, and (c) perspectives on topics and issues. I shall deal with these in this order.

First, the point of embodiment and materiality: Language lives in and through the languaging of real people, in their interaction with others. The utterances of language users are always embodied; they consist of “material” words enacted by embodied individuals and carried by their voices. When a person “fills his language with life” (to use a distinctly Bakhtinian wording), he or she adds prosody (intonation, accents, rhythm, etc.) and voice quality to it, in producing utterances. These properties of the voice contribute to sense-making in communication, especially to the emotional flavours attributed to the utterances in context.

The *second* point on personal identity is related to this. The physical voice, with its dialectal features and voice quality, gives off much information about the social and personal identities of the speakers (Laver, 1980; Scherer & Giles, 1979). These features index “the uttering body” (Bertau, this issue, p. 142), the source from which the speech comes, in terms of the speaker’s gender, age, geographical origin, sociocultural group, as well as personality, mood, and personal views. While the voice, particularly its ‘voice quality’, is personal, it also to some extent reflects the person’s biography.

Bertau (this issue pp. 136, 138-139) states that the voice carries the subject out of her- or himself. In slightly different wordings, it provides a “sound envelope of the self” (Anward, 2002, drawing upon Anzieu, 1979). A speaker’s utterances are signed (Morson & Emerson, 1990: 69), and the voice becomes a kind of personal embodied ‘signature’. As Bertau (this issue, p. 138) insists, the social nature of utterances and voices includes their addressivity. But if one speaks in one’s own voice, it is also a mark of authenticity. Jan Anward (2002) analyses particular types of predicament, under which speakers lose their own voices or have to use others’ voices. It is evidently more of a threat to one’s personal identity and authenticity to lose the voice than the nose.

The embodied voice is a thoroughly dialogical medium. The speaker can hear his own voice, almost as he hears the voices of others. Voices can be heard when visual

BERTAU'S AND OTHER VOICES

contact is excluded, for examples through closed doors or in the dark. Farr (1990) argues that vision is primarily a medium for observing others (we are only rarely objects in our own visual fields), hence in a sense more monological, whereas the vocal-auditory channel is more dialogical. At the same time, however, this reasoning neglects the enormously dialogical and interactional functions of mutual gaze, seeing one another's faces and eyes, explored in the writings of Lévinas (e.g. 1969).

Thirdly, individuals use their signed utterances (sometimes) to express particular ideas and views. This brings us to another, somewhat metaphorical but characteristically Bakhtinian sense of the term 'voice', namely, an expressed opinion, view or perspective, something that the person would typically say and presumably (at least at some level of intention) stand for.

Ideas, opinions, and perspectives on topics are by and large socially and interactionally generated and sustained. They live in the 'circulation of ideas' in conversations, the media etc. (François, 1993). Individuals appropriate many of these ideas and make them their own. They then indulge in voicing, i.e. expressing, these ideas themselves. One might say that they "vote" for these ideas, and others that hold the ideas.

However, there are many opinions and perspectives available in the sociocultural environment around us. Any single human being will, over time, be acquainted with many (partially overlapping) sociocultural communities and pick up many ideas, sometimes partly conflicting perspectives on the same phenomena or issues. This gives rise to at least two, but related, extensions of the concept of 'voice'. One is the idea of a generalised 'voice', or generalised perspective on a topic or topical domain, which is tied to a group of sense-makers, rather than a single individual. Such voices often meet and dialogue with each others in encounters between people. For example, we could talk about the "voice of medicine" as the ways a typical physician would express him- or herself on medical issues in encounters with patients, and the "voice of everyday life", which are ways in which patients approach (what are in some sense) the same issues, at least as long as they stick to everyday life perspectives (Mishler, 1984).

The three aspects of voices: embodiment, signature and perspective, can of course be talked about in alternative terms. One is emotional tone (intonation) of utterances, sources of utterances (who said this, who stands for that?) (Bertau talks about the agentive starting point of a message, this issue, p. 135), and the ideas behind people's discourse. Erving Goffman (1981) made an analysis of the notion of 'speaker' that largely mirrors this threefold division: the speaker may be an animator (the physical source or sounding-box), an author (who puts together the words of utterances) and a principal (the authority whose opinions are expressed or who is ultimately responsible for them).

One other aspect not directly highlighted by Goffman in the above-mentioned analysis is that one and the same person may appropriate, internalise or express several different voices, whether these voices are taken from other individuals or they are generalised voices. Here, of course, ‘voice’ is taken in the abstract sense of ‘perspective on a topical domain’, but notice that these are still perspectives entertained by or associated with human beings (individuals or collectivities), the stake-holders (who may held responsible for them). Moreover, some speakers sometimes even imitate the actual physical voices of other (real or virtual) individuals. This brings us to the heart of the notion of ‘polyvocality’ (‘multivoicedness’) in the self’s internal dialogue or contributions to external dialogue. Consciousness is a dialogical notion and involves the self’s ability to internalise others’ views on self’s own thoughts, utterances and actions. That latter is close to the notion of the ‘authoritative/authoritarian’ voice in internal dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981).

We also have polyvocality and heteroglossia in texts and larger discourses, the latter in a Foucaultian sense. They are often supported by disembodied practices, for example written texts. While literate societies with their use of written texts have strongly contributed to the abstract formalist view of language (there is a ‘written language bias in linguistics’; Linell, 2005), it is important to align with Bertau in insisting that texts too have dialogical properties like responsivity, addressivity, and often polyvocality. Indeed, Bakhtin’s theories were developed mainly on the analyses of literary texts (Dostojevskij, Rabelais, etc.).

Nonetheless, many societies exhibit heteroglossia, the parallel existence of different social languages voicing different perspectives, in which some are more monological and may appear to be supported by artificial means (such strong cultural or social sanctions), others are more ambiguous and dialogical, not imposing only one perspective on its users. Bertau reminds us of the background of Bakhtinian thinking in a Russian society with a conservative church (and, one might add, political regime) and a living everyday communication. This engendered Bakhtin’s and Voloshinov’s thinking in terms of (more or less) ”dead” and ”living” languages. In later Soviet times, this was transformed into the clash between the authority, authoritarianism and power of official discourse (about history and society) and the vernacular ”kitchen talk” among ordinary people (Wertsch, 2002).

Bertau’s concerns are very much about the ontogenesis of voices in the child’s development. This is discussed in terms of aspects of indexicality, body, intonation, imitation and internalisation. Time and space impede me from going into all these aspects (although I have hinted at some of them above). It could be said, however, that her account focuses primarily on how infants learn to internalise, appropriate and integrate others’(caregivers’) voices. It does not seem to go very much into later development. Here, there remain many interesting issues for dialogists to resolve. How and when does the child learn to play with other voices, distinct from their own

BERTAU'S AND OTHER VOICES

"authentic" one? What is the relation between using different voices in internal dialogue, and the ability to enact and externalise voices distinct from one's own, for example, in imitation and parody? Is there an intrinsic relation in ontogenesis between manner of speaking (physical voice) and type of perspective on issues (abstract voice)?

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LINELL

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