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WHAT WOULD BAKHTIN DO?

Abstract:

Originally delivered as a lecture at the symposium *Multilingual, 2.0?* in Tucson (13 April 2012), this essay by Holquist—the eminent Slavic scholar, comparatist, and translator of Mikhail Bakhtin—explores the ontological instability of any distinction among multilingual, monolingual, and bilingual phenomena and practices. Drawing on Wilhelm von Humboldt, Noam Chomsky, and recently re-discovered writings of Ferdinand de Saussure, the essay deepens Holquist’s career-long exploration of the dialogical nature and grounding of linguistic practice, as well its implications for future theory-making in multilingualism studies.

Keywords:

Bakhtin ♦ Saussure ♦ signification ♦ dialogism ♦ parole ♦ Chomsky

The relationship simile : dissimile is something quite different from the relationship simile : similia, and yet this relationship nonetheless goes elusively and profoundly to the heart of the notion of value.

—Ferdinand de Saussure (2006, 240)

It is impossible to create a single word.

—Sergei Kartsevsky (1884-1955)

Our announced topic is ‘multilingual,’ a term whose suggestion of number and diversity would appear to offer an alternative to ideologies based on the priority of any single language. And yet the adjective may be less innocent than it appears, insofar as it does more than merely name a condition in which several languages are spoken. I raise the question because ‘multilingual’ and its more common subset ‘bilingual’ are both what grammarians would call anaphoric adjectives; that is, their meaning depends on another prior word, and in this case, their Siamese twin, ‘monolingual.’ The nature of the problem, it seems to me, is already discernable in the fact that whatever else may be the case, both terms are incomplete in themselves and depend on the other to be meaningful. This is the first index that should make us suspicious of any claims to unity in the oneness presumed by ‘monolingual.’

As an anaphoric concept, ‘multilingual’ is specifically grounded in the opposition between many and one. And it sanctions, therefore, as its antonym the possibility that there might be such a thing as a single language. It is, of

course, true that at a very high level of generalization, we distinguish between people who do not understand common languages other than their own, and those who do. This commonsensical use of language may be useful in certain contexts, such as taking a census. If not further thought through, however, this way of conceiving language blinds us to its fractured nature when analyzed more thoroughly. A more accurate view, I will argue, is that the language of those who are said to speak only one language, in this everyday sense of the term, is already immersed in the ineluctable disunity and formal multiplicity that are the necessary condition for having any language at all. Failure to perceive the systemic multiplicity that is at the heart of any spoken language is a linguistically uninformed view that historically and politically is eventuated as linguistic monism.

Monism is always a negative doctrine. It is in the business of saying no to ideas that challenge the claim of unity and that to which it ascribes the condition of being *one*. Linguistic monism, as a positive belief system, conceives the world as consisting of geographically dispersed common languages each of which has a unique separate identity of its own that is both stable and unitary. In its aspect as an ideology of denial, monism thus opposes the reality of change; each of the distinct common languages it recognizes as a solid entity is of course at an unstable point in its history as a system. Further even, once such a separate language is conceived in its present moment as an immaculately integrated unity, it is in fact internally riddled with contending dialects. Languages are named for the people who speak them, and while a language when used in this way may therefore, at some level of abstraction, define a population, the speech of any community is merely a specific sector in an ocean of isoglosses that comprise its systemic limits.

The other identifying features of linguistic monism are found not in what it denies, but rather in what it affirms. In its positive avatar as a belief system monism holds—often unconsciously—that, among the conjuries of self-identical tongues in the world, one language stands out as not common. Historically, this singularity has been thought to derive from a number of different sources, often from some primordial *Ursprache* given by the gods. According to Plato's *Phaedrus*, the Egyptian god Theuth brought order into language through the introduction of literacy. Later, European scholars fought over the issue by debating what language Jehovah spoke to Adam. And in the 17th century, not

only Hebrew, which made a certain amount of sense, but Swedish and Flemish were also put forward as candidates for such a pre-pedalian time.

These attempts to uncover an Adamic trinity and natural language were made amidst a general ignorance about the nature of language as a phenomenon in its own right. And so such theories are really guilty of a certain historical naïveté. The situation is quite different when we include attempts to identify a language that is not only unified, but whose singularity is so totally unsullied a body that it has powers of its own. Such a language enters the realm of magic, separated from other human tongues as the sacred is distinguished from the profane. My favorite example of this is the case of Friar Luis de León, the Augustinian monk and professor of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew at the University of Salamanca, who in the 16th century translated the “Song of Songs” into Spanish from the original Hebrew text, and for his labors, the Church condemned him to five years in prison—not only because his target language was a vernacular Spanish, but also because in translating from the Hebrew, he had used a vernacular source language. As the Inquisition charged, he had employed the “corrupt original,” as opposed to the Latin vulgate, the authoritative translation of the Bible sanctioned by the Church, which, therefore, had ideological if not historical priority.

While the most familiar examples of such a practice derive from religion, post-Romantic nationalism, and the ways in which nation-states insist on a unique nature of language to bind their citizens together to the purity of its presumed wholeness—of these there is no end of examples. France, of course, has a long history of attempting to legislate the unity of a certain view of the French language, going back at least to François Premier who sought to promote French culture linked to a specific version of the French language in his 1589 *Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts*. How successful he was may be gathered from the fact that, at the end of the 18th century (according to the official survey of the *Assemblée Nationale*), out of a population of 28 million only three million French citizens spoke French well and even fewer were able to write it. At least six million did not speak French at all. Napoleon, then, was thoroughly French for his time, insofar that he had learned the French language only at the age of fifteen, although he spoke with a heavy Corsican accent all his life. After 1789, rapidly changing French governments sought to centralize their power and rob the Catholic Church of its ability to proselytize among credulous peasants in their own *patois*, so they formulated a French that, even if spoken by less than half the

population, would be the only legal language in the new revolutionary state, banning the several other tongues then commonly spoken in France.

In Germany, patriots such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte made tortuous arguments for the purity and superiority of the German language after Prussia's 1806 defeat by Napoleon. He was particularly pleased to point out that it was much better to speak German than French, which had been diseased by Latin. For 19th-century philologists, such as Jakob Grimm, who was also and not incidentally a legal historian, the native language had the capacity to define its speakers as uniquely German in the present because it contained the still living memory of the primordial Teutonic past. There are, unhappily, many other examples from the past—and what is more scandalous, from the present—in which a particular language is sacralized as a means unique in its power to unify the nation.

I reference only in passing the activity of contemporary zealots such as John Tanton, the founder of Pro-English, an organization founded to defend Arizona's 1994 English-only law, and who is also (predictably) leader of the most radical anti-immigration organization in the country, The Federation for American Immigration Reform, for which the acronym is of course FAIR.

'Bilingual'—although it names a separate set of problems—is, like 'multilingual,' also complicit in 'monolingual,' since both have the antonymic capacity to enable the monism of 'monolingual.' Many of us are uneasy with such complicity, and the question then becomes: "How can we unleash the potential heteroglossia of the multilingual, by decoupling it from its dark monistic twin?" Opposition to linguistic monism has historically taken several characteristic forms. There have been moral arguments based on appeals to fundamental human rights; there have been political arguments based on resistance to the overweening power of the state. I will assume the justice of those arguments and turn rather to the recent history of linguistics, including Bakhtin's metalinguistics, in an attempt to understand better the apparently counterintuitive truth that the condition of being in at least two languages appears to be the natural condition of having any language at all.

Since the 19th century, when the academic study of language breaks away from classical philology, there have been scientific arguments against monism, as linguists have sought to understand the intrinsic plurality of language in a number of different ways. Their activity is the attempt to theorize a connection

between the polarity of the one and the many—in the primitive and the philosophical sense, the roots of ‘mono’ and ‘multi’ as they apply to language. Arguably, the first modern attempt to meditate on the problem was that of Wilhelm von Humboldt. He posits the binary opposition, which haunts all subsequent attempts to define the nature of language. The static abstraction of extrapersonal laws, which—drawing on Aristotle—he called *energeia* for activity, and *ergon* for rules or work, constituted the systemic aspect of language. Von Humboldt was seeking to understand the relation between the unspoken, closed, phonetic, and syntactic rules that determine whether an utterance is meaningful or not in any given language and the unlimited possibilities for creativity each speaker of such a language has to shape meaning in particular situations in real life.

Von Humboldt was a Kantian who was disturbed by the utter absence of the role of language in critical philosophy. He felt Kant’s neglect of language was particularly egregious because language in von Humboldt’s view was precisely the key to answering the most important questions left unresolved by Kant’s epistemology. So, he argued that language was not, as had previously been assumed, merely the tool of thought, *ergon*, but was rather the activity of thinking itself: *energeia*. A political liberal during a brief period of Prussian reform, he sought to justify liberty by arguing that freedom was inherent in the unlimited ability of humans to exploit the rules of language. I note only in passing that it is of no surprise, then, that he is the real hero of Chomsky’s 1966 book on the history of modern linguistic thought.

Von Humboldt’s major work was published after he died and was prepared by his brother, Alexander, who was a great explorer, but did not really understand what Wilhelm was trying to do. His work was totally subsumed, as soon as it was published, by the emphasis on *ergonistic* language that was emerging in Germany. The unpredictable role of the individual speaker was an embarrassment to militants, such as those that comprised the *Junggrammatiker*, the young grammarians’ school of Osthoff and Brugmann, for instance. They emphasized the impersonal rule-governed aspect of language because it permitted them to make claims that were more general and abstract, similar to those of the natural scientists, who were attempting to understand the laws of physics.

Earlier in the century, when Pierre-Simon Laplace presented his celestial mechanics to Napoleon, the emperor sought to discomfort him by remarking the book contained no mention of God. Laplace famously replied that he had no need of that hypothesis. In a like vein for the neo-grammarians, the existence of real-life speakers of a language was the hypothesis for which they had no need. It is therefore ironic that it was precisely Ferdinand de Saussure, in his early Paris phase, one of the most brilliant of representatives of the neo-grammarians, who theorized a return to the creative aspect of language. He did so after his return to Geneva in 1891, where during the last years of his life he obsessed on the question of what it is that linguists study. He embarked on a magnum opus, intending to redefine the nature of language: a project, which was left uncompleted upon his premature death in 1913. He had, however, been using portions of his manuscript for the last three courses that he taught before his death. And two of his students—not particularly gifted students, by the way—published their notes from these courses in 1915 as the *Cours de Linguistique Générale*.

It was this version of Saussure's theories that admirers and opponents revered and attacked in subsequent decades, including—among others—Bakhtin and his friends in Russia. They were among the first to condemn what appeared from the evidence of the *Cours* to be the necessary first condition of Saussure's attempt to define language: the distinction between *langue*, the general rules that govern a particular language, and *parole*, the speech of a living speaker of that language. This fatal inner duality, as Saussure calls it, is at the heart of the *Cours*' attempt to articulate a coherent definition of language, as the discipline-defining subject of general linguistics. Only by neglecting the random energy of *parole* and concentrating on rule-ordered *langue* could the investigator, he says, provide a fulcrum that satisfies the mind. This stage of Saussure's thought can be summed up in his dictum, from the *Cours*—which has been repeated thousands of times since the taking-up of Saussure in literary theory—that says “Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences” (2013, 120). I will return to this well-known facet of Saussurian theory when I later discuss the relevance of Bakhtin's metalinguistics to our topic.

But let me remark at this point that the standard view of Saussure, based on his students' notes, turns out to be based also on a number of misconceptions. Misunderstandings have arisen because everyone assumed that the magnum

opus Saussure was known to be working on had disappeared. History is full of tantalizing losses and it was assumed that, like the lost chapters from Aristotle's *Poetics of the Definition of Comedy*, Saussure's manuscript *On the Nature of Language* had vanished. Then, in 1996, as workmen were digging up the old orangerie on the Saussure estate, a trove of manuscripts and notebooks were discovered, including sketches of the major book Saussure was working on at the time he died. The manuscript, variously labeled by Saussure *Science du Langage* or *De la Double Essence du Langage*, contains several elements that complicate the stereotypes based on the 1950 publication of his students' notes. It seems clear that Saussure was working his way towards an architectonics that would ultimately be able to embrace the idiosyncrasy of parole.

The key to doing so is found in a seminal essay by Saussure's student, a great Russian grammarian Sergei Kartsevsky who drew on his association with the late Saussure. Kartsevsky was not only a student of Saussure; he had also taught at Geneva for several years, indeed up until the 1950s. Kartsevsky, drawing on his association with the late Saussure, with whom he had many, many close conversations during which they drank together, writes "Opposition, pure and simple, necessarily leads to chaos and cannot serve as a basis of a system. True differentiation presupposes a simultaneous resemblance in difference." (Steiner 1982, 51) Ultimately, the glue that would be proposed both to distinguish between and bind together the primordial role of difference in language would be sought in precisely the area that the earlier Saussure had abjured.

The living speech used in human communities—we can see from the orangerie manuscripts that Saussure was, himself, working towards this answer. He develops an elaborate maritime metaphor. He was very poetic in these latter stages, and the writing is very different from the style of the earlier Saussure: full of wondrous drawings. He was kind of a mystic near the end. Among the metaphors he develops in these late manuscripts is one that goes like this: "A sign system must be part of a community. Indeed, any semiological system is not a ship in dry dock, but a ship in the open sea. Which is the real ship: one in a covered yard surrounded by engineers, or a ship at sea? Quite clearly only a ship at sea may yield information about the nature of a ship. A community environment changes everything. A sign system is destined for a community just as a ship is destined for the sea." But much as Moses did not live to enter the promised land, Saussure did not live to see the appearance of theories developed precisely to study the ship of language in a sea of community.

Later examples, such as the linguistic turn in British philosophy represented by ordinary language thinkers such as Stephen Mulhall, J. L. Austin, and Paul Grice, related back to Ludwig Wittgenstein's last phase. After the searing critique of Ernst Gellner's 1958 "Words and Things," the school lost some of its authority, with the exception of Wittgenstein. Along with the study of speech acts, of which Mary Louise Pratt has provided the definitive account (2013), I think of the work of Erving Goffman, John Searle, and William Labov, who began to have an impact in the 1960s.

A flood of impressive work has now emerged, as the study of everyday speech has evolved, in the works of Michael Silverstein, John Gumperz, Deborah Tannen, and many others. New disciplines have risen to study how language intersects with extralinguistic aspects of the cultures that speak them. Discourse analysis, conversation analysis (CA), pragmatics, linguistic anthropology, and sociolinguistics have all come into being to study impact of language on culture. But these later movements have all had a very circuitous relation to hardcore linguistics, which in the period after Saussure's death has been dominated either by the structuralism of Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetzkoi in Europe, or the behaviorist version of structuralism advocated by Leonard Bloomfield in the United States. Each of these schools had a complicated relation to the early Saussure of the *Cours* published by his students. Bloomfield does not even mention Saussure in his 1933 masterpiece *Language*. Nevertheless, Saussure's early commitment to an abstract system is a guiding principle in both Bloomfield and Jakobson.

There was, however, an even more extreme version of structuralist linguistics that was about to enter the linguistic field and clear away all before it. A formal date for this new revolution might well be 1946. The manuscript date of Zellig Harris' *Methods in Structural Linguistics*, widely regarded as the first step of true ascendancy of transformative grammar as it unfolded under the leadership of Harris' student Noam Chomsky. Harris was a protean theorist. Despite the formalist abstraction of much of his work, the anthropologically oriented linguist Edward Sapir considered him to be his heir. (In fact, he wanted him to be his son-in-law; Harris used to drive up to New Haven to see Sapir.) At any rate, on the one hand, Harris strove to incorporate mathematics into his analysis. He wrote three books that try to prove that mathematics and language are essentially the same. He sought to demonstrate that Bertrand Russell's dictum—that math equals language—was wrong, and that the opposite was true: that

language equals math. But on the other end of the spectrum, he is generally considered one of the founders of discourse analysis, through his attempts to test the limits of phonemic recognition of allophones in spoken discourse, and he was deeply involved in the early attempts to get machine translation started. Much of his work was funded by the CIA and the military, as was a great deal of Roman Jakobson's work in the same period.

It was Harris' student Noam Chomsky, however, who took the study of language to heights of speculative abstraction not reached since the attempts of the 13th-century Modistae to define a universal grammar. There are many ways to chart the twists and turns in Chomsky's thinking over the years. Many of them have concerned a much revised account of a duality between the unconscious legislating principles that enable humans to communicate but which themselves are never articulated, on the one hand, and on the other, the languages humans actually speak in everyday life. At various times, Chomsky has named the two aspects of the dualism "i-language," intentional—the "I" stands for intentional or internal—and "e-language," expressive language. In a later formulation, a major manifesto in the journal *Science* in 2002, really a very important piece, he takes up the question under the rubric of the faculty of language, instead of talking about language. He talks about the faculty of language, and he does that to distinguish between two levels of the faculty. He expresses the difference between the two faculties as FLB, the faculty of language broadly conceived, and the faculty of language in the narrow sense, FLN. His point was that while all animal species had, to a greater or lesser degree, faculty of language in a broad sense, only faculty of language in a narrow sense characterizes human beings. It is, in fact, the evolutionary element, he argues, that uniquely defines us as human beings. FLN is defined as an abstract internal computational system manifest in the benefits it bestows, such as the capacity of human children readily to master any human language into which they are born without instruction, the ability to translate from one language to another, and above all, the capacity to generate infinite sentences on the basis of finite rules. A speaker is capable of using and understanding sentences that have no physical similarity, no point-by-point relationship, to any sentence that he or she has ever heard before.

My friend, Richard Ohmann, who is now happily on the governing board of the Modern Language Association, used to conduct an interesting experiment with his students in the English Department at Wesleyan that demonstrates the vastness of this capability. He showed 25 freshmen a simple cartoon and asked

them to describe in one sentence what was going on in the picture. All 25 responses were different. Ohmann then had the results studied by a computer program designed to determine how many grammatically correct sentences could be generated from only the words used in these 25 sentences. The result was 19.8 billion different possibilities.

Chomsky's 2002 theses have recently been in the news because of their contestation by Daniel Everett, an expert on the Amazonian Pirahã tribe, a group, whose language defies most linguistic categorization.¹ Pirahã seems not only to lack tenses in numeracy, but—and this was the key—it lacks recursion.

Recursion is a concept used in many disciplines, such as mathematics and computer programming. Computer programming is impossible without it. But in linguistics, it first of all refers to the syntactical features of imbedding clauses within sentences, such as, when we say "Jack suspected that Ellen knew that Jane was not telling the truth when she had told Dick she had been present when Arnold fell off his bike." More generally, I've been working at Haskins Lab with some cognitive scientists on the problem of the difference between reading complex texts and the kind of reading we do when we read very simple texts. Finding a way to dramatize, define, and test complexing is a real problem. What we did was to use very complicated examples of recursion, and it seemed to have worked. Though getting to the fifth level of recursion could drive you crazy in the process, it is a very important piece of Chomsky's argument for the peculiarly human ability to have broad linguistic capability. An example that might help us here of how recursion works is an advertisement for Droste, the Dutch chocolate, that has a picture of a nurse serving a cup of cocoa on a tray that also holds a box of Droste chocolate with a picture of a nurse serving a cup of cocoa on a tray that also holds a box of Droste chocolate, showing a nurse. It is the principle behind the idea of *mise-en-abyme* and the Russian stacking doll known as *matryoshka*.

But why is recursion important? It is so because, as Chomsky argues, it is the algorithm that welds language to thought. It's what makes the way people think possible, or to use the terms from von Humboldt with which we began this foray, recursion is the name of the process that binds *ergon* to *energeia*, a limited set of rules that permits us to make infinite combinations of words. Recursion is important to my argument, so let me give one more example. It is the activity, a process, an epistemological dialogue between abstract rules and concrete words

that makes a real-life dialogue possible. The most frequently used metaphor for explicating recursion as a process is the relation of a cookbook to the actual preparation of a meal. Without denying the theoretical elegance or the originality of Chomsky's theory, it is nevertheless possible to see him wrestling with the great problem that has haunted all significant modern attempts to isolate what language is: how to find a single concept that could encompass all the systemic oppositions and existential contingencies that comprise languages as living phenomena.

Although he slights the subject of language as such, it is perhaps Kant who comes closest to a definitive account of the problem—which he never attaches to language, of course. It was Kant's emphasis on the synthesis, or *Verbindung*, of a priori concepts and intuition from experience: a new life that was the fundamental activity of the human mind—the relation between *Anschauung* and *Begriff*—and it was that which opened the way for von Humboldt's claim that language is thought, the groundwork of epistemology. In one way or another, all the figures I have mentioned so far have sought to specify this synthetic activity. One way or another, that is what they all have in common. The recursive process and the various schemes I have described is the activity of thinking the same problem—synthesis of opposites—in different ways.

If we could, at least tentatively, agree on so much then, the inclusion of Bakhtin in this series becomes obvious. Dialogue is his version of the synthesis that linguists have grappled with since at least von Humboldt's opposition between *ergon* and *energeia*. They've all perceived a gap in the foundational heart of language. This recognition has forced them again and again to define language as synthesis, and yet *i-language* / *e-language*, *FLB* / *FLN*, *signifiant* / *signifié*... the number of doublets goes on and on; all of them seek to bridge the gap. But what Bakhtin brings to the problem is a different foundation for the inquiry. A classic definition of this foundation is found in a characteristically eccentric fashion. In a footnote in his essay on the chronotope, he writes, "We employ the Kantian evaluation of the importance of time, space, and the cognitive process, but as forms of the most immediate reality, not as transcendental." (Bakhtin 2008, 85) While he indicates the epistemological and, indeed, ontological claims of Kant as aspects of a scheme, he insists on treating these metaphysical elements from a different point of view. That point of view begins by assuming that everything is dialogical because nothing is in itself. Like Saussure, he sees the world as primordially relational but he goes beyond, even, a Saussure of the late

notebooks, in emphasizing the role of personal interaction as his base in a community.

Returning for a moment to our opening remarks, we might say that for Bakhtin not only are there anaphoric adjectives, like hot / cold or monolingual / multilingual, but then for Bakhtin, everything is anaphoric in so far as everything is interconnected, and cannot be without the other. This emphasis on the relation between community and language is what drives Bakhtin to concentrate on, as the subject of his concern, what he calls utterance, or *высказывания*, the living word in exchange between unique individuals as the fundamental unit of language, rather than sign or the sentence.

Utterance is active; it is an event, a special category that Bakhtin always juxtaposes with existence itself, *события бытия*, the event of co-being. Bakhtin's metalinguistics grows out of his conception of human beings as persons who share the task of being responsible for their own situatedness in a particular time and place—the language of each of whom, then, is part of an ongoing exchange with others, who must also answer for the unique place that they occupy, in existence. In so shared an environment, there is no first word and no single word.

This is not the place to explore Bakhtin's point in any detail, but in conclusion, I hope enough has been said to suggest that there is a definition of the real of what could be known and the formulation of an ethic of dialogism. It follows from the complex nature of language—as it has been defined by linguists as a phenomenon, and by Bakhtin as a metalinguistics, as a core dynamic of human life. It follows also that nothing so complex and shared as language can ever responsibly be treated as a sequestered, unitary thing. Even the official form of a state-mandated dialect is no less riven than the dialects it has excluded—within the centrifugal tendencies that are at work in language itself. Monolingualism is always a fiction and, therefore, a state language policy is always suspect.

Editors' Note: A link to the talk upon which this essay is based, from April 13, 2012, is available here: [Link](#). Transcription and editing by Nea Petra Sample.

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¹ (Editors' Note) For discussions on Daniel Everett's observations of the Amazonian Pirahã as relate to Chomsky's theses, see for example Jennifer Schuessler in *The New York Times*, "How Do You Say 'Disagreement' in Pirahã?" (21 March 2012) [Link](#) and Tom Bartlett in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Angry Words" (20 March 2012) [Link](#).