

# Biography and philosophical legacy of Mikhail Bakhtin

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Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Soviet philosopher and literary critic by craft and revolutionary by virtue. Although Clark and Holquist (1984) provide a detailed bibliography for Bakhtin (see also Hill 1986; Dentith 1995), his persistence to democratically represent linguistic diversity during Stalinist authoritarian rule in the 1920's draws my interests. In 1929, the year of his first publication, he and other members of his intellectual circle were arrested and accused of being anti-Soviet insurgents. Bakhtin's colleagues were sentenced to labor camps. Due to Bakhtin's illness, he and his wife, however, were exiled to Kazakhstan for six years (Dentith 1995: 5-6). During these years, Bakhtin wrote one of his most notable essays, "Discourse in the Novel" (Bakhtin 1981).

Soviet surveillance of press and propaganda complicated the publicizing of Bakhtin's writings, which were not translated into English until the 1960's (Hymes's formative years). Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov were some of the first Western scholars to re-discover Bakhtin's works. Kristeva, for instance, introduced a Bakhtinian concept of intertextuality in her essay, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1980 [1967]) or the idea that a text exists not as a self-contained whole, but in a web of prior and potential utterances and discourses (Kristeva 1980 [1967]: 66). This view's versatility has evidently influenced anthropological studies of texts (i. e., Silverstein 1996), linguistic anthropology (i. e., Briggs and Bauman 1992), and performance studies (i. e., Taylor 2003; Graham and Penny 2014).

Intertextuality serves as a suitable introduction to Bakhtin's dialogic understanding of language and semiotics, more fundamentally. I emphasize

that Bakhtin's counter-hegemonic experiences undeniably shaped his commitments for theorizing language structure and ideological diversity under a dialogic principle. This principle prioritizes examining centrifugal (dialogic) forces over centripetal (monologic) ones. At PLC, for instance, a centripetal implementation of standardized Kichwa attempts to unify Ecuadorian Andean and Amazonian Kichwa centripetal dialects into one national form (c. f., Wroblewski 2012; 2014).

### **Dialogism**

For Bakhtin, a voice is a perspective, which can be expressed in spoken and written language. Written or spoken voices at any level of discourse (i. e., utterance; speeches) have inherent “ dialogic overtones” (1986: 102). By dialogic, Bakhtin maintains everyday spoken or literary language is integrally comprised of responsivity and addressivity (1981: 280). Everything said is intertextual and “ directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (1981: *ibid*). Here, a semiotic range for language extends beyond referential propositionality into multifunctionality—a purview shared by Hyme's (1962, 1964) programmatic call for an ethnography of speaking/communication.

That language is both novel and recycled for semiotic uptake challenges Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) assertion that “ la parole” or speech is an analytical impracticality. His dictum holds meaning as arbitrary (denotational qua sign exists apart from materiality) and less worthy of study than langue or grammar. Bakhtin's alternative translinguistic or dialogic enterprise for studying language is clear in his writing on speech genres:

...the single utterance, with all its individuality and creativity, can in no way be regarded as a completely free combination of forms of language, as is supposed, for example, by Saussure (and by many other linguistics after him), who juxtaposed the utterance (la parole), as a purely individual act, to the system of language as a phenomenon that is purely social and mandatory for the individuum...[original italics, 1986: 81]

Bakhtin was skeptical of what he called “ formalist” structuralism, which narrowed its analytical scope to centripetal forces (1986: 9) and instead focused on centrifugal reality-making capacities. This expressive power should be foregrounded as linguistic “ expressive point[s] of view,” analyzable “...in the uniquely contextualized actions of speaking subjects” (Hill 1986: 92). These voices are not beyond linguistics but rather provide meaning for the science’s concerns with truth values, their designations, and systematicity (Hill 1986: 92).

Rather than an “ either/or” (Holquist 2002: 39) view of speech and grammar, Bakhtinian language forms are simultaneous and often competing (Bakhtin 1981: 281; Woolard 1998). Bakhtin’s examples include: hybridity, “ the mixing, within a single concrete utterance, of two or more different linguistic consciousnesses” (1981: 429; See “ bivalency” in Woolard 1998); heteroglossia, “ that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide,... that which systematic linguistics must always suppress” (1981: 428); and polyglossia, “ the simultaneous presence of two or more national languages interacting within a single cultural system” (Bakhtin 1981: 431; Woolard 1998: 4). In the following sections, I discuss Bakhtin’s heteroglossia in a

marketplace in France. I return later to polyglossia to compare Hill's studies of Mexicano communities to PLC.

### **Dialogism in the Marketplace**

Bakhtin praised the literary genre of the novel as a prime example of heteroglossia and dialogism. He analyzed novelist works like that of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) discussed in "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics" 1984a [1929]. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky accomplished two noteworthy innovations as a writer. First, Dostoevsky transcended the monologic epic genre by democratically presenting a "diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages..." (1981: 262). Secondly, Dostoevsky "artistically organize[d]" these voices, without subordinating them to the voice of the author (1981: 262; 1984a). These written accomplishments allowed Bakhtin to analyze how marginalized speech forms can become amplified and socially meaningful in a marketplace.

Although Bakhtin's French Renaissance and carnivalistic marketplace in "Rabelais and His World" (1984b) differs from PLC at an economic level, they overlap at a level of official recognition. Bakhtin visualizes this marketplace as a ritualized site unofficially controlled by lower-class people (1984b: 154) performing "period bound...social dialects" (Bakhtin 1981: 292). Street performers gain a sense of control and social unity in their discursive freedom to perform socially marginalized speech forms (1984b: 154). That is, Bakhtin illustrates that elites in this marketplace recognized the legitimacy of:

Abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties [which] are the unofficial elements of speech. They were and are still conceived as a breach of the established norms of verbal address; they refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability. (1984: 187)

This festive time appropriately respects eccentric verbal humor and grotesque imagery. These heteroglossic voices “ who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally” can form a “ special collectivity” or social difference (1984b: 188). According to Bakhtin, these “ frank” linguistic exchanges, termed “ billingsgate,” (1984b: *ibid*) are “ free” from economic ties.

However far these differing carnivalistic voices maybe suspended from coercive and economic forces, they are not liberated from their respective social hierarchies. The French ruling class has discourse-producing power in carnival: a power to control the allocation of speaking turns (Phillips 1999: 190). While billingsgate can be deployed to undermine the ruling class, feudal unilateral recognition circumscribes these discursive practices in space and time. Counter-hegemonic humor for revolting can only be expressed in this carnivalistic context without encroachment. Bakhtin thereby seems to foreground festive laughter as a form of symbolic, not economic, capital in this event (Bourdieu 1986).

In comparison, Ecuador emplaces PLC into its plurinational development model (Gudynas 2011) via a neoliberal multicultural tourism market. At a regional level, PLC is a rural experiential option for Otavalo’s growing tourism

economy. Whereas governmental recognition formulates PLC's legitimacy and respectability, PLC public performances are paid for in neoliberal cash. In applying Hale's (2005) term, "neoliberal multiculturalism," Ecuador's governmental recognition of Indigenous cultural differences are grounded in "principles of state decentralization, privatization and the promotion of markets as the benevolent motor of development" (Anderson on Garifuna multiculturalism in Honduras, 2007: 385). As Povinelli (2002) demonstrates in Australia, however, the cunning of Indigenous recognition is a road to settler-domination paved with nominal good intentions.

In Australia, Indigenous multicultural tourism stipulates a transformation of Native cultures and languages into "late liberal" objects of desire (2002: 3, 50). Like Hale, Povinelli calls attention to a form of "liberalism" that is a governance and a legitimizing ideology for subjectivity formation. This subjectivity is part and parcel to a Subaltern or Indigenous condition of "impasses" (2002: 3). At this juncture, a person can "neither be or cease to be themselves..." (2002: 6), but instead perform to hyper-binary standards of indigeneity.

This double-bind of indigenous (in)authenticity is, in fact, experienced all over the world. Liberal and multicultural politics for tolerable and legitimate cultural differences can extend beyond economic dimensions and into issues of Indigenous sovereignty and political integrity. Simpson (2014: 11, 20), Barker (2005: 17), and Sturm (2014: 588-589), in Mohawk, Lenape, and Cherokee Country, respectively, echo that performing to essentialized and often, irreconcilable demands for cultural authenticity can determine the

validity of expressed acts of self-determination and continuity. Recognition still, however, primarily and psycho-politically serves the White subjects who establish and negotiate the limits of alterity in, for instance, tolerated and desired forms of tourism (Povinelli 2002: 49-50).

In Bakhtin's case, recognition sets the stage for tolerable vulgar comedy. As observed at PLC, the White liberal subject (i. e., educators, politicians, spiritual-seekers) is experiencing what Clifford diagnoses as modern Western society's " feeling of lost authenticity...[of] some essence or source...[of] authentic traditions..." (1988: 4) as in the French carnival. Authenticity may be a Western construct, however, the Native scholars above and Graham (2002) in Amazonian South America, make it clear that authenticity matters for Native American communities. Neoliberal recognition sets the stage for Andean verbal art to circulate in a global economy.

Audience, communicative competence, and linguistic form are key factors that have not yet been fully discussed. For instance, Kichwa may not radically differ from their global audience—those who pay for it (tourists), recognize it (politicians; see Povinelli 2002: 49-50, 57), and commend it (other tribes; local purists). To explore how these expectations materialize into language, Hill's next section discusses how language ideologies change to serve novel pragmatic functions. Both Hill and Hymes contribute to developing indexicality, performance, and discourse-centered approaches to how PLC verbal art forms can simultaneously register authenticity, aesthetic salience, and marketability.