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What is This?
An Enriching Methodology
Bakhtin’s “Dialogic Origin and Dialogic Pedagogy of Grammar” and the Teaching of Writing

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In “Dialogic Origin,” Mikhail Bakhtin—as teacher-researcher and theorist—presents readers with a remarkable essay on teaching grammar and style to 7th-year students (roughly equivalent to 10th graders in the U.S. educational system). In doing so, Bakhtin employs some of his most notable concepts (among them dialogism and “hero”) as informing and generative principles of writing pedagogy. Modern readers will find much to value as Bakhtin illustrates contextualized grammar instruction, defines grammar as an element of style, proposes innovative teaching methods, and advocates for theory-based pedagogy. Despite these significant similarities, the essay relies exclusively on stylistics, ignoring the demonstrable rhetorical effects of the stylistic choices illustrated in the pedagogy he outlines. In perhaps his most illuminating move, Bakhtin introduces his notion of hero directly into the language arts classroom, illustrating the concept as fundamental even to the grammar and style of language in everyday and academic (not simply literary) contexts.

Keywords: teaching of grammar; Bakhtin’s concept of hero; “no alibi” teaching; rhetorical effect; style

It is sometimes extremely important to expose some familiar and seemingly already well-studied phenomenon to fresh illumination by reformulating it as a problem, i.e., to illuminate new aspects of it with the aid of a set of questions that have a special bearing upon it. It is particularly important to do so in those fields where research has become bogged down in masses of meticulous and detailed—but utterly pointless—description and classifications.

—Valentin N. Vološinov (1973)

Rhetoricians and compositionists have for more than 20 years turned to Mikhail Bakhtin as a theorist whose interests in language,
discourse, and genre bring added insight to questions critical to our discipline. Part to this interest for nearly that long, I have always been engaged by what L. A. Gogotishvili and S. O. Savchuk describe as the “potential heuristic power of Bakhtin’s idea” (Bakhtin, 2004, p. 30)—especially as it relates to pedagogy. “Dialogic Origin,” Bakhtin’s newly recovered and recently translated essay, again reveals Bakhtin’s penchant for, as Vološinov describes in the epigraph above, exposing to “fresh illumination” an “already well-studied phenomenon.” In this case, he takes on grammar and style. Here, in fact, we find Bakhtin employing some of his most notable concepts—dialogism, “hero”—as informing principles of writing pedagogy.

Scholars frequently note that Bakhtin is averse to divorcing “ideological and formalist analysis” (e.g., Paton, 2000, p. 170). “Dialogic Origin” is no exception to that observation. Bakhtin (2004) writes,

One cannot study grammatical forms without constantly considering their stylistic significance. When grammar is isolated from the semantic and stylistic aspects of speech, it inevitably turns into scholasticism. Today this statement, in its general form, has become virtually a truism. (p. 12)

What, precisely, Bakhtin intends by “truism”—orthodoxy, folk belief, or accepted practice—we do not know, but we can comprehend the effect of his meaning, for the same is true with respect to the teaching of grammar in English. Isolating the teaching of grammar from the teaching of writing reduces grammar to little more than a skill to be mastered. As a result, grammar becomes a set of elementary principles, a mere task of memorization and implementation—not the living, generative element of language Bakhtin describes.

In this and many other respects, “Dialogic Origin” is a comfortable text for me; in it I find Bakhtin articulating pedagogical and methodological principles that inform current teaching practices in composition (Bakhtin, 2004):

- Students who recognize, successfully identify, and correctly punctuate certain grammatical or syntactic structures do not necessarily employ those same structures in their own writing. (p. 15)
- Grammar is more than correctness; therefore, writers’ choices about grammar must also take into account stylistic effect. (p. 13)
- Students’ own prose is not enriched by a language pedagogy that limits grammatical instruction simply to distinguishing between correct and incorrect forms. (p. 13)
Often, neither educational practices nor textbooks adequately inform students about the stylistic elements of grammar. As a result, young writers consider only the correctness of their grammatical constructions; they do not examine the stylistic purpose of those same decisions. (p. 13)

More successful instruction engages students in understanding the stylistic implications of grammatical constructions. (p. 14)

A writer’s grammatical (and therefore stylistic) choices should vary in response to the discursive context; one style, one grammar, is not suitable for all. (p. 22)

Despite the significant similarities between Bakhtin’s comments on grammatical instruction and our own understanding, “Dialogic Origin” relies exclusively on stylistics, ignoring the demonstrable rhetorical effects of the stylistic choices illustrated in the pedagogy he outlines. He notes, for example, that “grammatical form is . . . a means of representing reality,” that grammar has an “inherent representational and expressive potential” (Bakhtin, 2004, p. 13). Yet he does not exploit these two claims. In other words, Bakhtin rightly notes that grammar is much more than a matter of making grammatically correct choices, that two very different structures carry with them very different stylistic effects. He stops short, however, by claiming that such grammatical choices are “purely stylistic considerations” (p. 14) and not pursuing the representational and (therefore) rhetorical effect of grammar. Grammatical choices are, I would argue, also rhetorical choices.

Nevertheless, there is much to value in this essay. We get our first glimpse of Bakhtin as a teacher of 7th-year students (roughly equivalent to 10th graders in the U.S. educational system) and as a teacher-researcher, one who defines a problematic element in his students’ writing and then through a series of classroom activities creates a pedagogy that addresses that element. We even learn of the results of his pedagogy: Students’ writing showed significant increase in use of parataxic structures (Bakhtin, 2004, p. 23). He occupies, in Stephen North’s (1987) scheme, the role of experimentalist, one whose agenda is characterized by a desire to test and certify (p. 150). As an experimentalist, Bakhtin identifies a problem, designs and conducts the experiment, analyzes and interprets the data, and draws conclusions (p. 151).

His research problem and objective are clear and specific: Although they recognize and understand the structure, his 8th-year students do not use the parataxic sentence in their own writing,
Bakhtin then sets out (and describes in the essay) a series of exercises intended to increase the students’ use of parataxic sentences, thereby enriching their writing. The results are notable. Use of parataxic sentences increased from 3 sentences in 300 essays to 70 in 200 essays (Bakhtin, 2004, pp. 16, 23). In his dialogic pedagogy of grammar, Bakhtin privileges the expressive, spoken word and advocates for the value of quotidian discourse. Parataxic sentences, quite simply, are more “dramatic” than hypotaxic sentences, which “ruin” “harmonious language” “by a profusion of . . . unwieldy words,” creating speech that is “pedantic, dry, and unharmonious” (p. 17). Here, we see Bakhtin assuming and acknowledging that the hypotaxic is more academic, “more pedantic, mute, suited for silent reading” (p. 17). In each illustration, his expressed goal is to “demonstrate how the liveliness and expressiveness decreases in the second [hypotaxic] version” (p. 17). Bakhtin’s pedagogical goal is to enrich his students’ writing, which he sees as dominated and muted by the more academic and pedantic hypotaxic structure. Bakhtin (2004) steps back somewhat from valorizing the parataxic, noting that

we should, however, make sure the students understand that the latter [hypotaxic] forms are . . . legitimate and necessary. It should be demonstrated not only that hypotaxic forms are important in practical and scientific language, but also that they are essential to literature. The students must understand that the forms of parataxis cannot be used in every case. (p. 22)

The statement is easily translated into current writing theory and practice: No one style suits all rhetorical situations.

Then, in a strategic move I never anticipated he would make (but had long hoped he might), Bakhtin introduces his notion of hero directly into the language arts classroom. He presents his reader two sentences:

The news that I heard today interested me very much.
The news heard by me today interested me very much.

In analyzing the two, Bakhtin (2004) notes that “in the first sentence there are two heroes as it were, ‘news’ and ‘I’” and that “in the second sentence the second hero (‘I’) has been eclipsed” (p. 14). That small, slight shift—replacing the adjectival clause with the phrase—silences and subordinates the “I,” the second hero, removing it from its
dialogic relationship with “news.” The effect for Bakhtin is demonstrable: “All the words are now clustered around a single hero[,] ‘news’” (p. 14), which impacts the effect of the sentence.

The hero, as Charles Schuster (1985) informed us 20 years ago, is a “genuine rhetorical force,” and such is the case of the heroes of which Bakhtin writes in “Dialogic Origin.” The hero is not an entity to which one does something but rather an entity with whom one does something. One engages the hero “not as a static entity . . . but as a dynamic, changing, living force with which . . . [the author] has a defined, yet shifting[,] relationship” (Halasek, 1999, p. 91). The example above illustrates that Bakhtin understood the notion of hero as fundamental even to the grammar, the style of language.

In 1999, I noted—as Helen Ewald had before me in 1993—that compositionists had given scarce attention to the notion of hero (Ewald, 1993, p. 339; Halasek, 1999, p. 83). I attributed the oversight to two factors: (a) Bakhtin articulated his understanding of hero most comprehensively in texts dedicated to literature; and (b) hero as a metaphor adheres more logically to authors and audiences (who are themselves people) than it does to the subject of a discourse. The first of these (Halasek, 1999), I note, makes it difficult to reconcile the Bakhtinian notion of the “hero” as a character in the polyphonic novel with the more general subject of an utterance in a non-artistic or other speech genre, to reconcile, in other words, an aesthetic notion (“hero”) with a broader discursive notion of “subject.” The distinction between the two is not, however, overly problematic, except to the degree that it is problematic for compositionists who resist the literary-ness of Bakhtinian descriptions and examples. (p. 84)

But here, we find Bakhtin himself presenting us with the argument and the proof. He critiques his contemporaries’ pedagogies—which he felt provided little direction to students for determining when to employ a given grammatical construct—and then turns to the hero as a means of illustrating a corrective to those pedagogical oversights.

Although we may understand the efficacy of teaching grammar within the context of student writing, I have argued that we continue in composition studies to overlook “in any concentrated or programmatic fashion . . . the generative effect of having students ‘play’ with subject and form as a means of exploring the specific ways that form changes, even constructs[,] meaning” (Halasek, 1999, pp. 106-107). But here, Bakhtin (2004) illustrates how we might begin to engage
students in such “play.” What would it mean to our pedagogy if we engaged students in the same sort of exercise Bakhtin created for his students, asking them to engage sentences as “contain[ing] several (at least two) ‘heroes’” (p. 31)? If nothing else, such an exercise will, I believe, serve the function Gogotishvili and Savchuk suggest in their notes on “Dialogic Origin”: a “restoration of the implicit communicative situation, which always involves interaction among several positions—that of the author, the ‘hero,’ the topic, and the addressee who spoke previously” (p. 33). It might be the case that “by understanding the subject of discourse as a hero, teachers of writing may begin to encourage among students a new understanding of their relationships with subjects and a deeper appreciation for the forms of their discourses and their engagement with others’ discourses” (Halasek, 1999, p. 110).

Bakhtin’s comments here encourage me to extend my earlier claims about the hero. Students will better appreciate not only the “forms of their discourses and their engagement with others’ discourses” but also the generative power of their own discourses as sites for what James Zappen (2004) identifies as a “testing, contesting, and creating” of ideas (p. 12). In the case of “Dialogic Origin,” that testing, contesting, and creating occur in the utterance and in the very fabric of grammatical structures and stylistic decisions. Rhetoric, representations of reality, exist even in the finest, most minute elements of discourse. Like rhetoric, which Zappen argues Bakhtin seeks “not to reject but dialogize,” grammar is recast as dialogized (p. 40). Our very grammars are dialogic. Linguistics and grammar are not most productively described, Bakhtin argues, in terms of structural correctness but in terms of stylistic (and, I would argue, rhetorical) appeal and power. Consider the following comment by Zappen (2004): “Bakhtin thus objects not to rhetorical discourse as such but to the limited understanding of rhetorical discourse—and specifically the formalism—in linguistics and in the philosophy of language” (p. 41, italics added). Now substitute grammar for rhetorical discourse: “Bakhtin thus objects not to grammar as such but to the limited understanding of grammar—and specifically the formalism—in linguistics and in the philosophy of language.” In both cases, we are encouraged to employ approaches to discourse and grammar that realize their interanimated natures. In fact, Bakhtin (2004) illustrates the ultimately unsatisfactory and unsatisfying results of purely formal analyses of parataxic sentences—sentences whose very (dialogical) essences are nullified by the analysis itself (p. 32). His project, rather, is one of what
Frank Farmer (1998) describes as “uncovering” (p. 202). Bakhtin (1984) employs the Socratic devices of syncrisis and anacrisis: “the juxtaposition of various points of view” and “provocation of the word by the word” (pp. 110-111) to uncover the epistemic nature of grammar.3

Along with this project of uncovering the dialogic nature of grammar, Bakhtin (2004) in “Dialogic Origin” illustrates the extent to which “no alibi” living extends (p. 24). As a teacher, Bakhtin (1993) employs what he theorizes in Toward a Philosophy of the Act: Language and discourse—even grammar—must be understood and taught as a living word, a performed act (p. 33). Even in their very approaches to grammar, writers can practice a “phenomenology of participation” (Bialostosky, 1999, pp. 11, 18). Such an active and participatory methodology in composition studies will certainly enrich and enliven our pedagogies.

NOTES

1. In the 6 years since the publication of A Pedagogy of Possibility (Halasek, 1999), rhetoricians and compositionists have done little more to pursue this line of inquiry.
2. “The Problem of Speech Genres” (Bakhtin, 1986) and “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art” (Vološinov, 1976) both take up “hero” in less artistic terms but are less often cited in scholarship on Bakhtin and composition studies.

REFERENCES


Kay Halasek is an associate professor of English at Ohio State University, where she serves as the coordinator of the writing center. Author of *A Pedagogy of Possibility* (2001 CCCC Outstanding Book) and coeditor of *Landmark Essays on Basic Writing*, she is currently working on *Out of Time, Out of Space: Theorizing Composition Historiography Through Bakhtin*, a book-length project that examines disciplinary histories through Bakhtin's notion of chronotope.