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Introduction

Heteroglossia is a translation of the Russian term *raznorechie*, which was coined by Russian literary analyst and language philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. The term refers to (1) the simultaneous use of different kinds of forms or signs; and (2) the tensions and conflicts among those signs, based on the sociohistorical associations they carry with them (Ivanov 2001: 259). The first part of this definition subsumes multilingualism, but includes a broader range of linguistic phenomena. Although multilingualism typically refers to situations and practices that involve "distinct languages," the different kinds of forms or signs of heteroglossia include intra-language social variation, e.g. regional dialects and registers related to profession or age. Bakhtin coined the Russian term *raznorechie* specifically to refer to such intra-language variety within Russian, varieties with competing social and political implications, and the term is sometimes translated as "the social diversity of speech types" rather than "heteroglossia."

What is distinctive about heteroglossia is not its reference to different kinds of linguistic signs and forms, however, but rather its focus on social tensions inherent in language. Social and political tensions and struggles that exist in society inhabit language, making it alive with social meanings. A primary tension in language is between pulls toward a (national) standard form of language—Bakhtin referred to these forces as "centripetal" forces—and forces that push toward various local, non-standard, or demotic forms, which he called "centrifugal" forces. Words are not neutral instruments, and these social tensions are at work even if the speaker does not intend them and is not conscious of them: "Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance" (Bakhtin 1981: 272). To speak then, is to participate in these ongoing processes, regardless of one's intentions to participate in them or not. Our words have already been used by others, accruing social associations, and our use of these words continues the process of accruing and shedding meanings.

The emphasis of heteroglossia on the social and political nature of language contrasts with the relatively formal and synchronic emphases of most linguistics. From the perspective of heteroglossia, language is not a neutral, abstract system of reference but a medium through

which one participates in a historical flow of social relationships, struggles, and meanings. Linguistic signs come with social and historical associations, and they gain new ones in their situated use. This focus on the social dimension of language use makes heteroglossia distinct from both popular and formal linguistic notions of "multilingualism," which conceptualize it as the coexistence of multiple linguistic systems that are discrete, ahistorical, and relatively self-contained.

The fact that heteroglossia takes social and political dimensions of speech as its starting point puts it superficially at odds with the more formal, organizing trope and title of this *Handbook*, "Multilingualism." The contributions to this *Handbook*, however, emphasize the social contexts and functioning of multilingualism, whether at the level of polities, education, or other institutions. Heteroglossia represents a philosophical perspective on language and communicative practices from which to approach contexts, practices, and meanings of multilingualism.

Heteroglossia versus formal linguistic approaches

Bakhtin coined the term heteroglossia (*raznorechie*) in his 1930s essay *Discourse in the Novel*. He used the term and perspective to analyze how meanings in novels were generated and the ways in which language and processes of signification in novels were distinct from those of other literary genres such as epic poetry. This work remained unpublished under various Soviet regimes until 1975, and his notion of heteroglossia did not receive significant attention in the English-speaking world until the publication of a translation by Emerson and Holquist (Bakhtin 1981). Since that time, the term has been extremely popular in literary studies and the work of scholars interested in social and political meanings in language.

Although the ostensible focus of Bakhtin's essay is ways in which meanings are generated in novels, the essay presents a distinctive philosophy of language and meaning. This philosophy of language—which emphasizes the social and historical nature of language—directly countered the dominant linguistic paradigm of his time, the structuralism of Saussure, a paradigm that championed the formalism that has remained central in most linguistics. Briefly reviewing Saussure's notions of language and meaning can serve to highlight the distinctiveness of Bakhtin's perspective of heteroglossia and its ongoing relevance.

Saussure's 1916 *Course in General Linguistics* (Saussure 1983) distinguished between *parole*—the messy phenomenon of actual acts of speaking—and *langue*—the underlying, abstract principles of language that allow for referential meaning to be generated. It is this second dimension of language, the abstract, formal system of principles that Saussure found to be the proper focus of linguistics. Within this approach, he conceptualized meaning in terms of "signs." Signs, according to Saussure, have two components: a "signifier" (*significant*) and a "signified" (*signifie*). The *signifier* is the form of the word or sign, whereas the *signified* is the idea or concept connected to that sign. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, i.e. there is no inherent or natural relationship between a signifier and its meanings. This type of meaning is sometimes called denotation or referential meaning.

The Saussurean privileging of the formal and referential characteristics of language informs contemporary popular and academic language ideologies. From a popular, Western folk perspective, language is a system of denotation, in which words stand for, or represent, things or ideas. The function of language is popularly seen as the communication of propositional information, as in a conduit metaphor (Reddy 1979). Non-referential dimensions of meaning are seen as secondary or epiphenomenal in this folk model. This folk understanding is layered with hegemonic ideologies that favor language varieties that are associated with powerful and privileged groups in society. These prestigious varieties are seen as being

"standard" or correct forms of the language and ideal for "good," i.e. propositionally efficient, communication.

Formal linguistics also treats the social and political functioning of language as marginal, approaching language as a semiotic system in and of itself. The primary interest is in relationships among elements of this system, abstracted from any actual instances of language, for example Chomsky's privileging of linguistic competence over linguistic performance as the proper object of study. The boundaries of the system are implicitly taken to be the boundaries of the language-as-idealized, rather than of actual speech, which may or may not be monolingual. Formal linguists focus on meanings and relationships that remain stable across time, speakers, and contexts, and pay relatively little attention to actual use of language. In taking a formal, synchronic approach to language, formal linguists thus neglect relationships between linguistic forms and the social and political worlds that inhabit speech.

Bakhtin approached language entirely differently, conceptualizing it not as an abstract, synchronic system but rather as a medium through which one participates in a historical flow of social relationships, struggles, and meanings. His focus is the relationships between language and social and historical worlds, rather than relationships among elements in an idealized system. Bakhtin opens the essay in which he introduces the concept of heteroglossia with the claim that language is essentially a social phenomenon, and that issues of form and ideology are not separable:

> The principal idea of this essay is that the study of verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract "formal" approach and an equally abstract "ideological" approach. Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning.
>
> *(1981: 259)*

Bakhtin argues that language cannot be studied as a system in-and-of-itself. Abstractions from language, such as *langue*, are not the phenomenon itself, but only idealizations of one dimension of language: "It [language] is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualizations that fill it, and in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is a characteristic of all living language" (1981: 288). For Bakhtin, language is a medium that is alive and moving with the consciousness and practices of people. Language as a self-contained system is always an idealization, "a theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an express of the centripetal forces of language" (1981: 270). Formal, abstract approaches to language capture the tendencies toward standardization in language, but they ignore the equally present centrifugal forces that fragment language and move it away from unitary standards. He argues that such theoretical idealizations are opposed to the reality of actual language: "A unitary language is not something given but is always in essence posited—and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia" (ibid.). The closest that language gets to being an abstract, formal system is when the force toward standardization ("centripetal force") is conceptualized as an idealized, static state rather than an analytical construct created from one moment in an ongoing process.

This conceptualization of language as a medium of participation in social life embraces a distinctively social and political notion of *meaning*. For Bakhtin, "no living word relates to its object in a *singular* way" (1981: 276). The signifier–signified relationship (referential meaning) posited by Saussure represents only one dimension of meaning. For Bakhtin, social and

pragmatic meanings are the *actual* meanings of language. He argues that linguists and language philosophers do not pay sufficient attention to actual discourse, which leads them to focus on referential meaning: "Linguistics and the philosophy of language acknowledge only a passive understanding of discourse ... it is an understanding of an utterance's *neutral signification* and not its *actual meaning*" (1981: 281).

The perspective of heteroglossia recognizes that meanings are not stable across people, activities, or contexts. Utterances occur in contexts that are not neutral, and the relationship between a word and its object is shaped by this context, including prior uses and associations of that word:

> The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the object from the sidelines.
>
> *(Bakhtin 1981: 276–7)*

The relationships between utterances and meanings are not drawn from a neutral, external reservoir of signifier–signified relationships. Utterances come with social and historical associations from prior usage, and they gain and shed meanings in their situated use.

The Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia overlaps in significant ways with the semiotic and linguistic anthropological notion of non-referential indexicality as developed by Peirce (1955) and Silverstein (1976). Both heteroglossia and indexicality rely on notions of intertextuality, in which meanings of forms depend on past usages and associations of those forms rather than on arbitrary referential meaning inherent in the form. A regional accent is an example of an index. The relationship between that accent and that region is established through the historical fact of speakers from that region speaking in a particular way. There is no inherent relationship between the indexical form and meaning, simply one of historical association. The relationship is not arbitrary, as with denotation, but rather historically specific. Like heteroglossia, approaches to language that center on indexicality recognize the referential function of language, but conceptualize reference as merely one pragmatic function among many in a system that is intrinsically pragmatic (Silverstein 1976: 20).

Heteroglossia in a multilingual segment of talk

Heteroglossia represents a general philosophy of language and meaning, but the examples Bakhtin gives of its workings are limited to textual examples from novels and literary texts. In this section, I use the perspective to analyze a brief transcript of multilingual interaction between two teenagers to illustrate how it can shed light on social and communicative worlds. This segment of talk includes both Spanish and English, but it also includes other kinds of social variation. I describe the variety of forms in this interaction and the tensions and conflicts among those forms, based on the sociohistorical associations they carry with them. Addressing both of these levels in this segment—the variation in forms and the sociohistorical associations of such forms—provides a window onto some of the ways that these two teenagers position themselves in the world and negotiate a historical moment.

The participants in the following exchange, Isabella and Janelle, are two high school friends whose parents emigrated from the Dominican Republic to the USA. Isabella came to the USA

during first grade, at about the age of seven. Janelle was US-born and raised. They speak Spanish with their parents and newly arrived relatives, but they generally speak English with each other, occasionally including Spanish phrases or words. They are academically successful students at an urban, low-income school in Providence, Rhode Island. In the interaction represented in the transcript below, they are sitting on steps outside of their school building at the end of their lunch period. Isabella has returned from eating lunch at a diner near the school, and she has been describing the turkey club sandwich and cheeseburger she had just eaten.

JANELLE: Okay, a turkey club is *pan to(s)ta(d)o* ['toasted white bread']
ISABELLA: *pan to(s)ta(d)o*. Like regular *pan-* ['bread']
JANELLE: yeah
ISABELLA: *to(s)ta(d)o* ['toasted']. With ... um ... tomatoes and lettuce. And it has mayonnaise.
JANELLE: And turkey.
ISABELLA: Then ... No, that's the ...
JANELLE: the top
ISABELLA: first part. And then it has another *pan* ['slice of bread'] in the middle, and the bottom has more mayonnaise and turkey. Oh it has bacon on it too.
ISABELLA: Just slamming ['great']!
JANELLE: How do you eat that?
ISABELLA: Then they- she cut it in half for me and I ate that, gluk gluk. And I was like, 'Yo, let me get a cheeseburger'. A cheeseburger has lettuce, tomatoes, whatever you want to put on it, like a Whopper you can make out of a cheeseburger.
[TWO BRIEF TURNS OMITTED]
JANELLE: Damn /de' əm/. I can't //eat all that.
ISABELLA: //Then I drank the lemonade.
JANELLE: Only with that turkey thingee *//ya yo estoy llena*. ['I'm already full'].

Meanings of multilingualism

A traditional way of approaching such interactions in literature on multilingual interaction is to describe the forms and various possible functions of such language switching. Following this approach may be of limited value here. Although Janelle and Isabella codeswitch into Spanish several times in this segment, it is not clear what distinctive functions the switches serve in this segment. The uses of Spanish in the first half of this segment may help achieve reference tracking of the sandwich components, but this could also be achieved monolingually. Seeking functions of codeswitching can be analytically productive in terms of revealing some of the social and linguistic functions that can be achieved through language alternation, but this approach can also reproduce the ideology that it is natural to speak only one language in a speech exchange. The fact that social and cultural linguists have focused so much attention on the meanings and functions of codeswitching, for example—while paying relatively less attention to corresponding monolingual speech—reflects the monolingual ideology that codeswitching is not an entirely natural form, but something that is in need of explanation (Woolard 2004).

A growing body of literature since the early 1980s has challenged the assumption that the languages used in codeswitching are essentially distinct and that codeswitching necessarily generates local meanings that are distinct from ones communicated through monolingual talk (Heller 2007; Meeuwis and Blommaert 1998; Woolard 2004). The multilingual practice that most directly undermines assumed distinctions among languages is the relatively frequent, intra-sentential codeswitching that has been widely documented both in intra-group peer interaction

among the children of international labor migrants to Western societies and in many urban, African contexts (e.g. Myers-Scotton 1993; Swigart 1992). In such cases, the search for a function of a particular switch may be akin to trying to explain why a monolingual speaker selects one synonym or phrasing over another (Zentella 1997: 101). When language alternation functions as a discourse mode in its own right (Poplack 1980), it undermines the assumption of meaningful opposition between languages.

At the same time that multilingual speakers themselves do *not* treat different languages as distinct in some contexts, dominant groups in Western societies regularly *do* see languages in multilingual contexts as distinct. For example, Janelle and Isabella treat these codeswitches as unmarked in the segment above, but in the wider US context, language alternation is nearly always socially marked. Being a monolingual English speaker is an ideological default against which difference or distinctiveness is constructed in the USA (Urciuoli 1996). Various, nativist, English-only groups, for example, have sponsored legislation to criminalize the use of languages other than English in many contexts, including school, government, and workplace. They portray such language alternation as undermining American unity, citizenship, and decency.

Many academics since the 1970s, in contrast, have celebrated the linguistic sophistication displayed in codeswitching and the social strategies that some forms of it imply (Gumperz 1982; cf. Myers-Scotton 1993: 74; cf. Woolard 2004). For more politically oriented analysts, such codeswitching can be seen as a form of resistance to dominant discourses of unquestioning assimilation (Gal 1988: 259) and a means to constructing a positive self in a political and economic context that disparages immigrant phenotypes, language, class status, and ethnic origins (Zentella 1997). The meanings and implications of particular forms are a function of the interpreter's subject position in a larger sociopolitical field. The notion of heteroglossia embraces such competing social and political meanings of multilingual talk.

Multilingualism versus language-internal variation

Focus on constellations of linguistic features that are officially authorized as codes or languages, for example "English" or "Spanish," can contribute to neglect of the diversity of socially indexical linguistic resources *within* languages. From the perspective of heteroglossia, multilingual speech is simply one way of negotiating social and communicative worlds. If one's starting point is social meanings, it is not central whether a speaker is switching languages, alternating between a dialect and a national standard, register shifting, or speaking monolingually in a variety that highlights language contact. This relieves the analyst of formal questions of what exactly constitutes multiple languages versus multiple dialects (Alvarez-Caccamo 1998, 2001), what is a codeswitch versus a loanword or borrowing, and what constitutes the competence level in a second or third language that allows one's speech to count as multilingual (Meeuwis and Blommaert 1998). The focus can thus shift to individuals as social actors using heteroglossic (Bakhtin 1981) sets of linguistic resources to negotiate the social world.

Both the English and the Spanish that Isabella and Janelle use contain diverse forms that index aspects of their social experiences and perspectives. The English that they use in the exchange above, for example, includes forms with widely varying social associations. They use "standard" American English forms ("Oh, it has bacon on it too"), which are prestigious in institutional contexts such as education, government, and the professions. They use vernacular forms associated with youth ("I was like, 'Yo, let me get a cheeseburger'"), which serve to mark an adolescent identity that is distinct from those of children and adults. Some of these youth expressions are associated with African American English ("Just slamming" and "Damn" dé əm/), which further distinguishes their speech from the mainstream adult world.

Their brief uses of Spanish similarly index particular linguistic histories. Both Janelle and Isabella elide syllable final /s/ (*to(s)tado, e(s)toy*) and intervocalic /d/ (tosta(d)o), and both pronounce /n/ as a nasal velar /ŋ/ (*pan*). Additionally, Janelle pronounces word-initial *y* and *ll* as an affricate /j/ (*ya, yo, llena*). All of these pronunciations are characteristic of Caribbean Spanish, particularly Dominican and lower-class varieties, and are widely perceived as such by Spanish speakers (Lipski 1994).

Finally, the word order used by Isabella—"like a Whopper you can make out of a cheeseburger"—suggests the influence of Spanish discourse patterns on her English, reflecting her bilingual socialization. She preposes the direct object ("Whopper") of the verb in this segment in what has been called fronting, focal object construction (Silva-Corvalán 1983: 135), or focus-movement (Prince 1981).

Language, whether monolingual or multilingual, carries social meanings through phonological, lexical, grammatical, and discourse level forms. These forms index various aspects of individuals' and communities' social histories, circumstances, and identities. The wide range of monolingual forms that can carry indexical meanings and the wide variation in indexical objects of such forms (e.g. education, bilingual heritage, regional origins) suggest the limitations of formal approaches to multilingualism. Attending to a wider range of form-meaning relationships, whether in monolingual or multilingual speech, can better shed light on social and communicative worlds.

Heteroglossia as perspective on social history and power

A distinctive characteristic of heteroglossia is that it conceptualizes language meaning as a function of both linguistic forms and historical social relations. This inclusion of historical social tensions and inequality helps to explain the relative salience and meanings of the linguistic features noted in Isabella and Janelle's conversation, above. Meaningful oppositions or distinctions among these features arise not on the basis of formal distance among forms, but on the basis of historical power differentials and struggles with which particular forms are associated. Their codeswitching, or multilingualism, has no *inherent* meaning, for example, but becomes meaningful in the context of political projects and interests, both historical and contemporary. In nineteenth-century Europe, nation-building projects explicitly linked language, identity, and nation, naturalizing monolingualism and monolingual speech. Currently, US nativism and ideologies of assimilation make Isabella and Janelle's codeswitching not only a marked form, but also a disparaged one in the larger society.

Similarly, their Caribbean Spanish phonology is socially meaningful because of historical power relations. Their phonology contrasts, in particular, with Castilian, the prestigious variety spoken around Madrid, Spain. Caribbean varieties of Spanish are descendants of varieties spoken in the southern Spanish province of Andalusia. The fact that Castile, rather than Andalusia, has been the center of executive power in Spain over the last 500 years has made Castilian the most prestigious variety of Spanish. Through processes of hegemony, historical power differentials are translated into present-day judgments of value, correctness, and prestige, leading many Spanish speakers to see Dominican Spanish as bad, or wrong, Spanish.

Finally, the meanings of their use of African American English expressions are a direct function of historical social inequality. The coercive history of African slavery in the USA has resulted in the maintenance of distinctively African American ways of speaking and ongoing stigmatization of African American English in the larger society. The very existence of this way of speaking, as well as its social evaluation in the larger society, is a direct result of this social history. In each of these cases, the meaningful opposition is between forms associated

with groups historically or currently in power—monolingual Americans, speakers of Castilian varieties of Spanish, and White Americans—and forms associated with speakers in lower positions in social hierarchies.

Joining the linguistic utterance with social history

The perspective of heteroglossia explicitly joins the linguistic utterance in the present and the sociohistorical relationships that give meanings to those utterances. Patterns and meanings of multilingual talk at the local level can thus be linked to larger sociohistorical questions in ways that are not possible with a more formal approach. Poplack (1988), for example, shows that contrasting patterns of codeswitching in two bilingual communities—a New York Puerto Rican one and a Ottawa-Hull French Canadian one—correlate to contrasting social histories of the two groups. Even though the genetic relationship between French and English is virtually identical to the genetic relationship between Spanish and English, both the use and interpretation of codeswitching are very different in the two communities.

Bilingual New York Puerto Rican switches tend to be smooth and seamless, that is unmarked, whereas French–English switches tend to be highlighted, or marked, through repetition, hesitation, intonational highlighting, and even explicit metalinguistic commentary. Whereas bilingualism is seen to be emblematic of New York Puerto Rican identity—differentiating members from island Puerto Ricans and non-Puerto Rican Anglophones—Ottawa-Hull French Canadian bilingualism is not associated with a social identity distinct from that of local monolingual French Canadians. For New York Puerto Ricans, the use of two languages is both an emblem of a distinctive identity and a practice that draws in immigrant newcomers. In the French Canadian situation, there is no stream of newcomers to incorporate and no distinctive identity bridging disparate communities that needs to be enacted or maintained through language.

Gal (1988: 247) argues that particular multilingual ideologies and practices can be linked to even broader political economic and historical contexts. Thus, groups with similar structural positions in the world system—for example second-generation labor migrants to Western, industrialized states—will display similarities in codeswitching meanings and practices. Thus, Italian–German switching among the children of Italian labor migrants to German will be similar to that of Spanish–English codeswitching among second-generation Puerto Ricans in the USA, both in terms of patterns and local functions.

Studying multilingualism can be a route to understanding social worlds not because of formal linguistic distinctions among languages, but because of the inherent social and political nature of language. In contexts such as Western societies, where multilingual talk has been made to count as marked and socially meaningful, insights into communicative worlds can come from attention to the social and political processes that have made monolingual versus multilingual speech a meaningful opposition. The processual and socially infused concept of heteroglossia captures the irreducibly sociohistorical and ideological bases of language meaning and use. Heteroglossia encourages us to interpret the meanings of talk in terms of the social worlds, past and present, of which words are part and parcel, rather than in terms of formal systems, such as "languages," that can veil actual speakers, uses, and contexts.

Related topics

Codeswitching; discourses about linguistic diversity.

Further reading

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(In this edited volume, 20 contributors present perspectives that emphasize the social and political embeddedness of multilingualism, countering commonsense assumptions about and notions of multilingualism.)

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