



July 2011

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### Recommended Citation

Cheatham, William (2011) "Co-authoring Speech Genres: A Bakhtinian Approach to Mutually Recognitive Dialogue," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 9. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol3/iss2/9>

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# Co-authoring Speech Genres: A Bakhtinian Approach to Mutually Recognitive Dialogue

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Published online: 30 July 2011  
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## Abstract

In his theory of communicative action, Habermas posits that language is a fundamentally intersubjective tool used for the activity of reaching mutual understanding. Interlocutors assume the *freedom* to question claims made in discourse and use *reason* to achieve communicative *power* together. Thus language in itself forms the drive mechanism of successful discourse—that is, only by presupposing the ability of other subjects to take language as an alterable, reason-based, and empowering tool is mutually recognitive dialogue possible. However, beyond these basic presuppositions, speakers maintain, I argue, an acute appreciation for the particular *ways* of speaking—what Bakhtin termed “speech genres”—at work in conversation. It is my position that sensitivity to the influence that speech genre choices have on the subjectivities in dialogue poses the subject as ethically responsible for the co-creation of ways of speaking that are more or less enabling for interlocutors in context. While speakers use the norms of communication in different social and institutional spheres to inform their choice of utterance, these norms depend as well on changing, contextualized patterns of speech. Thus the subject takes an active stance in dialogue: communicative freedom allows the subject a bearing in the utterance act as a re-articulator of speech genre, as one who can therefore influence generic norms.

In his theory of communicative action, Habermas posits that language is a fundamentally intersubjective tool used for the activity of reaching mutual understanding.<sup>1</sup> Interlocutors assume the *freedom* to question claims made in discourse and use *reason* to achieve communicative *power* together.<sup>2</sup> Thus language in itself forms the drive mechanism of successful discourse—that is, only by presupposing the ability of other subjects to take language as an alterable, reason-based, and empowering

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions, and the Lifeworld,” in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 215-255.

<sup>2</sup> See Klaus Günther, “Communicative Freedom, Communicative Power, and Jurisgenesis,” in *Habermas on Law and Democracy: Critical Exchanges*, eds. Michel Rosenfeld and Andrew Arato (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 234–254, for a concise explanation of these terms.

tool is mutually recognitive dialogue possible.<sup>3</sup> However, beyond these basic presuppositions, speakers maintain, I argue, an acute appreciation for the particular ways of speaking—what Bakhtin termed “speech genres”<sup>4,5</sup>—at work in conversation. I claim that sensitivity to the influence speech genre choices have on the subjectivities in dialogue poses the subject as ethically responsible for the co-creation<sup>6</sup> of ways of speaking that are more or less enabling for interlocutors in context. While speakers use the norms of communication in different social and institutional spheres to inform their choice of utterance, these norms depend as well on changing, contextualized patterns of speech.<sup>7</sup> Thus the subject takes an active stance in dialogue: communicative freedom allows the subject a bearing in the utterance as a re-articulator of speech genre, as one who can therefore influence generic norms.

Because Habermas does not have a sophisticated account of semiotics at the level of the utterance act, he cannot approach communicative interaction with the same level of precision as Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, the utterance is the location of subjective bearing on an issue which cannot occur in routinized, systematic, or “sedimented” language. Indeed, these abstract forms acquire value only by removing the subjective impulse, the “eruption” of meaning which happens as a result of this or that particular subject’s issuing a *response* to language “as such” from the subject’s place (a gap) in the dialogic-symbolic order.<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin, by focusing on the utterance act as the locus of

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “What is Universal Pragmatics?” in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 21-103.

<sup>4</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres,” in *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 60-102.

<sup>5</sup> See Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990) throughout for a comprehensive overview of Bakhtin’s work.

<sup>6</sup> Dialogue is arguably Bakhtin’s most important conceptual focus (see Michael Holquist, *Dialogism* [New York: Routledge, 1990]). Grappling with the new problems in theories of perception and temporality inaugurated by the work of Einstein and Bohr, Bakhtin attempted to work out the implications for self-other relations, especially with regard to communication. His emphasis on what might be called the “aesthetics” of communication—that is, the ways in which two individuals engage in linguistic and bodily semiotic exchange in order to create coherent understandings of self and other that expand the signifying boundaries of both—is featured most prominently in Bakhtin’s major work on aesthetics/ethics, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), as well as in his analysis of the author-hero relationship in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans./ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> (as an aside) Working at the intersection of semantics and pragmatics, François Recanati offers a robust defense of Contextualism in *Literal Meaning* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 2004).

<sup>8</sup> See Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, esp. 5-77, for more about the dialogic relationship. I also want to make an analogy to Lacan’s notion of the subject. In *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Funk (New York: W. W. Norton

fundamental tension<sup>9</sup> between the subject's take and the other's take, between speech and system, subjective bearing and historical ideology, etc., exposes the identity-constituting nature of speech communication. In other words, Bakhtin is able to concretize Habermas' theory of communicative interaction in order that the deeply existential<sup>10</sup> problems involved in the interaction of conflicting voices in dialogue finally come to light.

While individual utterance acts are unique, different spheres of communication depend upon relatively stable types of utterances or *speech genres*. Primary genres, those used by speakers in context, include the everyday rejoinder or simple written message. Secondary genres, on the other hand, re-present primary genres in an abstracted form, such as the novel, dramatic work, scientific research paper, or legal transcript; here, the original context of the utterance is removed and the utterance no longer "belongs" to the original speakers but instead conforms to the patterns of expression in the larger work (i.e., it is a new utterance).<sup>11</sup> Speech genres regulate the style of the utterance act by outlining the norms for the construction of the whole, including its completion and the relation to be enacted between speaker and hearer.<sup>12</sup> The boundaries between utterances consist in the change of speaking subjects; the speaker ends her utterance in order to "relinquish the floor to the other or to make room for the other's active responsive understanding."<sup>13</sup> The point at which this change occurs Bakhtin calls "finalization," involving three main factors: (1) the semantic exhaustiveness of the theme (what needs to be said), (2) the speaker's speech plan (subjective bearing), and (3) the rules for finalization of a typical utterance in the genre.

Because every utterance act is unique, each demands accountability of the subject. But the act represents the agency of the speaker to a greater or lesser degree depending on the genre of speech in which the act is performed. Artistic genres, for instance, involve a high level of subjective expression because they demand creativity from the

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& Company, 2007), 678, Lacan says, "The cut made by the signifying chain is the only cut that verifies the structure of the subject as a discontinuity in the real." That is, the subject first makes its appearance as a "break" in the perfect functioning of the symbolic order.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 32. Also, Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, esp. 90-91.

<sup>10</sup> See *Art & Answerability* for Bakhtin's most thorough discussion.

<sup>11</sup> One of Bakhtin's key insights is that secondary genres are able to re-articulate and re-interpret in more or less enabling ways the thematic, stylistic, and compositional concerns of the primary genre; there is, to a greater or lesser extent, a "restructuring or renewal" of the genres of everyday speech through secondary genres. See Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 71.

individual as constitutive of the act itself. In contrast, utterances in the most highly regulated speech genres, such as the military command or legal document, assume only minimal subjective quality, limited to an almost “epiphenomenal” result of the simple fact that a particular person uttered this particular speech act.<sup>14</sup> On Bakhtin's view, the speaker's choice of speech genre has a profound impact on the meaning of the utterance and on the composition of the dialogue itself; what the speaker says in her choice of speech genre is as much a part of the dialogue as what she intends to mean by the utterance within that genre, and indeed, interlocutors *always speak in concrete speech genres*.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, the utterance achieves its answerability<sup>16</sup>—its status as an ethical claim on the subject—solely in the context of speech genre. And because the utterance act is the place of tension in virtue of which a speech genre coheres as an object of analysis, speech genres *as such* cannot be presupposed in a stable form in dialogue. Thus recognition of another's utterance act must involve recognition of the other's capacity for re-orienting dialogue toward renewing the components of speech genres. If interlocutors are to recognize one another as truly capable of accepting or rejecting validity claims (per Habermas), then they must also maintain sensitivity to the speech genres in use, specifically with regard to the more or less enabling capacity of the genres to allow for the participants' self-determination in terms of their speech choices.<sup>17</sup>

### The Normativity of Dialogue

On Bakhtin's view, when interlocutors participate in dialogue they assume an active stance; they always anticipate a rejoinder from the other. Even “from the speaker's first

<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*. One can already see the threat to communicative freedom when regulative speech limits the individual's capacity to self-orient, to assert oneself as a bearer of the right to accept or to reject the truth, sincerity, or rightness of the utterance act.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 78: “Even in the most free, the most unconstrained conversation, we cast our speech in definite generic forms, sometimes rigid and trite ones, sometimes more flexible, plastic, and creative ones.” Also, in Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982), 293: “[T]here are no ‘neutral’ words and forms [...] Language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency [...] Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life.”

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Holquist, “Answering as Authoring: Mikhail Bakhtin's Trans-Linguistics,” *Critical Theory* 10 (1983): 307-319.

<sup>17</sup> Here I mean the ability to realize one's fundamental valuational stances from a position of uncoerced self-identification within the word as well as the intersubjectivity of dialogue itself.

word,” he says, the listener begins to agree or disagree, to augment or apply it.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this responsive take consists both in the bodily response (perhaps in silence), in the speech act, and/or in the action which “answering” the speech act entails (e.g., following a command). The important thing to note is that, because there is no clear dichotomy between “speaker” and “hearer”—that is, because “from the first word” (or even before) we anticipate the speaker’s take on the speech genre and already, in a sense, begin to speak ourselves—one’s choice of speech genre has an effect on the other’s subsequent speech choices. That is, a rational acceptance of one’s capacity to affect (in a more or less enabling way) the ability of the other to maintain a non-coercive space for self-assertion is a precondition for entering a dialogic relationship of mutual recognition.

Constitutive of such a relationship, then, is the realization that one’s speech-generic choices carry *ethical weight*. By accepting this demand, adopting receptivity to the alteration of the three main components of speech genres, interlocutors show their concern for the ways in which their own speech affects the other. From such a stance, moreover, they effectively demonstrate an openness to radically new forms (or even reversals) of speech norms and thus to the unrestricted self-positing of the other. Such openness, however, requires more than simply allowing the other a “place at the table,” as Habermas would have it. Subjects also maintain empathy or affective attunement to the other’s experience; in Searle’s formal pragmatic terms, they respect the other’s reference to the Background and Network<sup>19</sup> that ground the very possibility of subjectivity in the lifeworld.

Bakhtin illustrates the inherent vulnerability to (and of) the other in language with his notion of the “double-voiced” word: the utterance act incorporates both the subject’s voice and the imagined voice of the other.<sup>20</sup> Therefore both external and internal dialogue involve a juxtaposition of opposites, he says, of conflicting meanings and value-stances, such that in every voice there are “two contending voices,” there is “confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously;” every experience is “accompanied

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<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 68.

<sup>19</sup> For Searle, the Background is the set of abilities, capacities, tendencies, and dispositions that humans have and that are not in themselves intentional states. The Network involves the beliefs, desires, and other intentions necessary for any particular intentional state to make sense. This parallels Bourdieu’s *habitus*, the internalized schemata, sensibilities, dispositions, and taste acquired by a particular subject in a particular lifeworld. See also Merleau-Ponty, “The Sensible World and the World of Expression,” in *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France: 1952-1960* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970) for a summary discussion of the body as “expression” of the symbolic in the lifeworld, from a phenomenological perspective.

<sup>20</sup> GSM & CE, *Bakhtin*, esp. 139-159.

by a continual sideways glance at another person.”<sup>21</sup> This easily intuited idea, that speech involves at least two agents—whether imagined and anticipated (e.g., when authoring a written work) or tangible and “accessible” as in spoken dialogue—who affect one another's choice of word and mode of articulation of the same, reveals the power of speakers in context. If words are “double-voiced,” then one's choice of speech genre affects more than the discourse trajectory. These choices call *whole selves* into dialogue; choosing words (from, e.g., a common vs. esoteric vocabulary) and modes of articulation (e.g., a satirical vs. solemn gesture) affect both the speech and subjectivity of the other.

Thus interlocutors make room not only for new linguistic content but also for new ways of expressing that content. They don't simply recognize the presuppositions of communicative interaction; nor do they simply acknowledge the basic situation that each occupies on her own as an agent with a unique life history. Equally important is that they recognize one another as authors of speech genres, the choice of which effectively reveals the *immanent effects* of one's speech on the other. That is, speakers continue to pick up on the slight nuances of speech which occur as the result of the subject's casting of her speech in a particular genre. Sensitivity thus demands listening and vulnerability to the other<sup>22</sup>—indeed, one's success in reaching mutual understanding here would depend on assuming such a position.

It can be stated, then, that interlocutors choose a speech genre in anticipation of the perlocutionary effects<sup>23</sup> such a choice will have on the other's sense of her own ability to continue dialogue as an uncoercively reflective and volitional subject. Here we can see the ways in which a conformist approach to a dialogue between, e.g., a doctor and a patient may restrict the openness of one or the other participant (or both) to the self's own freedom to articulate speech that addresses what is *really important* to the self in such an interaction. Clearly, such restrictive interchange is not really dialogue in Bakhtin's sense of the word. True dialogue depends on all participants sharing the conviction that through their speech they help to identify (to constitute) and restructure the other's sense of herself. The implication is that before, during, and after interlocutors mutually recognize the Habermasian presuppositions, they assume active positions as co-creators of a dialogue which to a greater or lesser degree engages the other as a subject constituting and constituted by the intersubjective meeting, an essential component of which is the continual positing, negotiating, and re-positing of

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<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Recognition would involve this kind of openness as the first and foremost constituent of dialogue—i.e., as prior to language.

<sup>23</sup> That is, the effects derivative of but not inherent to comprehension of a speech act. See José Medina, *Language: Key Concepts in Philosophy*, 25, for a clarification of the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary effects.

speech genres: sensitivity to speech genre choice is necessary for subjects to really recognize each other.

Because interlocutors take a responsive stance toward utterance acts, responses to the utterance will be mediated through the speech genre deployed in the act. Speakers choose genres knowing that the other's response will differ qualitatively from the response evoked by a different choice of genre. Speech genres can be more or less enabling, then, not only because they may presuppose a power relation between the participants—as in the dialogue of doctor and patient—but also because these same genres have in themselves more or less flexibility. That is, the genres at play in a dialogue between doctor and patient may be more or less flexible than those in a dialogue between, for example, parent and child. If interlocutors are to facilitate mutual understanding in dialogue, then they must recognize the implications of choosing one genre over another.

A major consequence of this line of reasoning is that, because subjects call one another out into dialogue, it is not enough simply to “accept” or to “tolerate” the other's speech. Here it will help to think of the ambiguous claim of the affluent subject implicitly asserting her rejection of classism while in dialogue with an impoverished subject. Of course, such a conversation would present numerous challenges to both speakers upfront because of differing cultural and linguistic histories, and thus differing points of reference in the creation of one or the other's narrative telling of her (life-) story, all of which is predicated (in this example) on the subjects' varying socioeconomic circumstances. But to the point, the affluent subject can take an implicit position of acceptance or tolerance which displaces her ethical burden onto a presuppositional (and thus unreflective) role, à la the speech genre in play, which determines what “should” happen (what one should say) in this case for “recognition” to be satisfied; there is, constitutive of this dialogue, reference to a presupposed rule of speech-conduct that transgresses both Habermasian and Bakhtinian requirements for mutually recognitive dialogue. The false “Other”<sup>24</sup> onto which her speech burden—the raw burden of the confrontation of affluence and poverty—is displaced allows her to rationalize thus: “we have different priorities and we speak in different ways, but I will try to understand because I am a fair person,” without actually accepting the consequences of allowing herself to be vulnerable to the experience of the other's disadvantaged subjective position.

Once this position has been taken, the affluent subject accepts a passive reception of the other's speech in order to understand the basic (de-subjectivized) semantics of the

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<sup>24</sup> See Slavoj Žižek “Only a Suffering God Can Save Us: Section 2: Kierkegaard,” EBSCO Publishing, 2007, <http://www.lacan.com/zizmarqueemoon.html>, for a discussion of this “displacement” of subjective burden.



utterances at hand, for perhaps no more than pragmatic reasons.<sup>25</sup> The affluent subject might accept this kind of position in order to protect herself from the perceived diminution of her own subjective power at the hands of the impoverished subject. The impoverished subject could, in the right kind of dialogue, pull the affluent subject into a meaningful dialogue of a kind totally unfamiliar (and possibly threatening). In this sense the affluent subject's position is a rejection of the responsibility to recognize oneself as accountable for one's speech-generic choice in the *co*-creation of meaning, of one's self- and other-constituting activity.

Looking at the dialogic interaction in this light allows us to see why choosing "acceptance" and "tolerance" allows the subject to feign understanding and avoid doing the hard work of communication; such a resistance is a far cry from the activity of Bakhtin's speaking subject who, as the author for the hero, establishes and re-works for the other an "extremely complex and subtle atmosphere that would force him to reveal and explain himself dialogically, to catch aspects of himself in others' consciousnesses, to build loopholes for himself."<sup>26</sup> At the individual level, utterance acts, cast in the traditional speech genres, overreach the boundaries—the thematic, stylistic, and structural components—of those same genres. Introducing even minimally different thematic content, subjective style, or patterns of finalization, then, alters what one comes to assume to be the standard way of speaking in a certain context.<sup>27</sup>

Here I have suggested that, because Habermas' theory of communicative action lacks a precise account of the meaning of the utterance act as it plays out in speech genres, he is unable to reveal the existential implications for subjects in dialogue. Bakhtin's work is our best source for understanding these issues in a sophisticated manner. It is my claim that communicative freedom must include the ability to delimit, in a creative and pragmatic way, speech-generic forms. The individual in a truly recognitive relationship is only able to adopt a legitimate position from which to respect the other if that same individual accepts responsibility for her positing of speech acts through concrete speech genres. These generic forms, then, stay open to question, open for dialogue, allowing the tripartite structure of speech genres—their thematic, stylistic, and compositional elements—to emphasize for interlocutors in context a revisionary account of the ethical responsibility inherent in communicative interaction.

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<sup>25</sup> This argument should be helpful for discussing race relations, political debate, interfaith dialogue, etc.

<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 54.

<sup>27</sup> See discussions of the critical potential of publics oriented (with a healthy skepticism) toward the "spontaneous," grotesque, and stylistically altered forms of communication crucial for a Bakhtinian approach to dialogue and narrative in *Beyond Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, eds. Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

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