

Moments in the Modern History of the Language Sciences

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I am old now, and the story of the remarkable ascendancy of the language sciences over the past 50 years to become the queen of social studies (as broadly conceived) is well enough known. What is less known is how it all started, and I would now like to put down on paper these crucial early episodes before they are lost to anybody who might be interested in them. After all, most of the protagonists have now passed on, although a few linger in retirement or hover near it.

BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND

It was very late in the afternoon and very late in the year of 1952. The senior of the country's only two professors of linguistics was looking out of his window in Browning's Court at the dusk falling over the leafless trees of Edgbaston. He was bundled up in a coat and scarf because England was yet again experiencing a fuel crisis and the heat was off and the lights were dim. He heard some sprightly steps on the wooden stairs that led up to his room and wondered who it might be; certainly all the students had long departed, most doubtless to their usual Christmas jobs of sorting or delivering mail for the post office.

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To his delight, it turned out to be his friend, Patrick, the left-leaning reader in social history, recently returned from a lecture tour of the Soviet Union. After exchange of the usual pleasantries, Professor Bakhtin inquired both eagerly and nervously, "Mischa?" Patrick shrugged apologetically and said, "Alas, Nikolai, I never got to Saransk, but I did give my lecture on E. P. Thompson and the British working class in Nizhniy Novgorod. Afterwards, in the lavatory, a young chap sidled up and said that he was one of your brother's student teachers in Saransk and could he give me a packet to bring to you. Well, to cut a long story short, here it is." And with a flourish that would not have come amiss on the stage at Stratford, he pulled a dirty oilskin packet tied up with rustic string from his raincoat pocket and offered it to Bakhtin Sr. The older brother quickly cut the string with his penknife to reveal a short handwritten note and a bulky typescript. "My brother says that he is quite well given his infirmities but goes on to say that he has no immediate hope of getting his latest work published in Russia and wonders whether it might find a small audience in England . . . if I translate it," he added with a wry chuckle.

"It's called *Problema Rechevykh Zhanrov*, which I guess would be in English something like *The Problem of Discursive Genres*, whatever that might mean. Anyway, I'll have a look at it over the Christmas holidays. Now, let me get you a glass of sherry while you tell me all about your lecture tour and how things are in Russia."

LONDON

Two months later, Rupert Firth, professor of general linguistics at the University of London, Professor Bakhtin's sole counterpart in the land, was idly watching his secretary Muriel moving papers from her office to his and the converse. "She just keeps on popping in and out of the office all afternoon long," he mused. "Now where does the verbal part of this sentence begin and end? Bloomfield and his chaps want to chop language up into tiny discrete pieces, but in this kind of sentence, this approach just doesn't work. Everything here seems to make a contribution to the continuity, to the iterativeness of Muriel's actions. There is a prosody here that somehow extends across the whole utterance."

"Utterance," he said out loud, "that reminds me." He jumped up and strode down the corridor to a small bathroom-sized, windowless

office. "Halliday" he said to a lanky young man as he swept in, "my colleague, Professor Bakhtin of Birmingham, is calling in this afternoon on his way to the meeting of the Philological Society. He will want our opinion of his brother's manuscript that he sent us. I would be grateful if you could tear yourself away from *The Secret History of the Mongols* for a few minutes when he arrives to give us the benefit of your opinion." And swept out without giving his young protégé a chance to assent or demur.

Firth put down his teacup with a decisive movement and observed, "Alright, I take it that we are all agreed that this is a remarkable short treatise, and one that should be published as soon as possible. I would be happy to use whatever influence I have with Oxford University Press about it, though I don't quite know what to suggest about any potential royalties!"

"It's quite changed some of my thinking," noted Michael Halliday, "but I am a bit puzzled by Mikhail Bakhtin's use of the word *utterance*. My understanding is that *utterance* refers to a short self-contained stretch of speech, but here it seems to be used very flexibly to cover almost any kind of discourse."

Bakhtin responded, "You are, I think, at least partly right. My brother's use of *vyskazyvanie* is unusual, but I can't for the moment find a better term in English to capture what he meant. If Oxford accepts the work, I would be happy to add a footnote explaining the difficulty of translating this concept into English."

PHILADELPHIA

A thoughtful Zellig Harris hustled across the University of Pennsylvania campus one bright if windy morning in late March. He was on his way to a meeting with his brilliant young student, Noam Chomsky, who had just finished his master's thesis on the morphophonemics of modern Hebrew. He was wondering what Chomsky would say about possible dissertation topics and about the carbon copy of a small monograph—apparently to be published later in the year by Oxford—that had been smuggled out of the Soviet Union and sent to him by Rupert Firth. He also sincerely hoped that the wretched Senator Joseph McCarthy would never get wind of the treatise.

"Morphophonemics, schmorphophonemics" announced Chomsky, "this is stunning stuff, and casts your article in *Language* on discourse analysis in a new light. Bakhtin is correct that all utterances are in

some way dialogic, and the future of linguistics depends on all of us recognizing this, including you, sir." Harris nodded curtly and then said mildly, "In my defense, let me quote my distinguished colleague at the University of Michigan, Ken Pike: 'Linguists are rarely wrong about what they say, but mostly wrong about what they don't say,' and in that sense, I had insufficiently recognized to see discourse as response to prior texts."

"So what should I do?" asked Chomsky.

"Given your new enthusiasm, there's nothing much for you on the East Coast," was the reply. "Go west, go to sunny California, go to Garfinkel."

And the rest, as they say, is history.

AFTERWORD

That history, as I said at the outset of this small reminiscence, does not now need to be retold in any detail. But perhaps I should remind anybody who might read these few pages of just a few facts. Bakhtin's *The Problem of Speech Genres*, as it was finally called, was published in the same year and by the same press as Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and these two seminal works have been linked in the thoughts of the world's intelligentsia ever since. They remain, despite the academic industries that have grown up around them, tantalizingly similar and tantalizingly different. However, language sciences really shot to its current preeminence with the appearance in 1964 of *Aspects of a Theory of Language and Social Life* by Noam Chomsky and Erving Goffman. Within space of 10 years, a Nobel Prize in language sciences had been established, and fittingly, the first laureate was Mikhail Bakhtin, although he was too frail to travel to Stockholm to receive it. Instead, it was presented to him at his retirement home on Klimovsk, where he made his last public utterance, this time about dialogism and religious practice. Later laureates were, of course, Chomsky and then Halliday, the latter for his masterpiece *Context in Text and Text in Context*. There is doubtless more to say, but the hour grows late and the cat is scratching at the door.

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