

Authoring the Dialogic Self

Gergana Vitanova

DIALOGUE STUDIES ∞

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Authoring the Dialogic Self

Gender, agency and language practices

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INTRODUCTION

As an immigrant and a second language learner, I have long been fascinated with the multifaceted aspects of language acquisition. The traditional, mainstream research in the field of applied linguistics, however, has not reflected my own experience, nor has it been able to answer some of my most difficult questions: How do we develop an agency in a second language? What are the everyday, discursive practices, in which agency originates? What is the role of gender in the development of identity? Perhaps other, even more pressing questions have been: How do we conceptualize discourse, identity, and agency; what theory or framework would allow us to link constructs that have defied not only researchers of language acquisition, but also philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, communication scientists, and literary critics alike?

An important part of my interest in this topic lies in the concept of heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990), according to which qualitative investigators often choose a question of personal significance:

Heuristic inquiry is a process that begins with a question... that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one's self and the world in which one lives.... The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with... every question that matters personally there is also a social – and perhaps universal – significance. (p. 15)

Years after I first came to the United States, as I was exploring the literature in second language acquisition, a disappointment began to build. Where was I? I could not locate my language learning journey in the popular socio-psychological models in my theoretical textbooks. The very personal and even emotional process of establishing a linguistic and social self was missing in the tables of the quantitative studies I was reading.

Today, as someone who teaches theories of second language acquisition, I still experience the difficulty of choosing a text that encompasses the cognitive, psychological, and social facets of the process. I have not been alone in this struggle. Tarone (1997), for instance, has expressed a concern that, “most current SLA theories overemphasize the cognitive and downplay or even ignore the fact that the second language (L2) learner learns by interacting with others in various social contexts” (p. 137). Similar concerns have prompted Firth and Wagner's assertion (1997) in a now classic article that the dominant view of second language acquisition on discourse is “individualistic and mechanistic” (p. 285). The writers also

mention that learners who do not acquire the second language in a formal setting have remained largely excluded from second language research. Their observation echoes the findings in a report published by the National Center for English as a Second Language Literacy Education (Johnson, 2001), suggesting that most of the work in second language acquisition on adults has focused classrooms and, specifically, in post-secondary educational contexts.

Scholars like Firth and Wagner (1997), who call for a reconceptualization of the field of second language acquisition, have found the lack of studies focusing on the everyday use of language particularly problematic. In a follow-up to their original article (Firth & Wagner, 1998), the two authors invite what they call “trespassers” (p. 93) to the field, in other words, theories, concepts, and methodologies that had not been integral to the area of second language learning, and that had been largely excluded from the scope of formal linguistics or psycholinguistics. More recent reviews trace how Firth and Wagner’s appeal for a reconceptualization has impacted the discussion on the social and cognitive factors in the field in the last decade (Firth & Wagner, 2007). Others have outlined the major socially-embedded approaches that have influenced research in second language acquisition (Swain & Deters, 2007), including poststructuralism, sociocultural theory and, to an extent, Bakhtin’s dialogism.

Traditionally, second language acquisition research has been grounded in a fairly unitary approach to language and the individual. As it becomes evident in some major, still often-used textbooks and in handbooks, formalist linguistic and cognitive approaches prevailed in second language studies until quite recently. This is not surprising considering the evolution of applied linguistics as a discipline in the West. It originated when behaviorism and structural linguistics governed our understanding of human nature and the nature of language, respectively; thus, the notions of error, error analysis, and the individual learner’s interlanguage development largely dominated the discussion in these early years (Corder, 1974; Selinker, 1972). The differences between instructed and non-instructed learning and the effect of instruction on grammar development, particularly morphology (Lightbown, 1983, 1985; Long, 1983) were of great interest not only to theorists but also to practitioners for pedagogical purposes. Data were usually collected in a classroom setting, and a quantitative approach to data analysis was employed. Even the few studies interested in socio-psychological factors in adults’ language acquisition in naturalistic settings (Schmidt, 1983; Schumann, 1978; Shapira, 1978) demonstrated little concern with who actually the learners are or in what societal contexts the learning takes place.

Schumann’s work has been particularly influential and is still widely cited as an example of a model introducing socio-psychological factors. Schumann (1986), in proposing his Acculturation theory, identified a variable called acculturation

as a major causal factor in second language acquisition. In it, a learner could be positioned on a continuum that ranges from social and psychological distance to social and psychological proximity with speakers of the target culture. He reasoned that learners' levels of language acquisition are exclusively dependent on the degree to which they acculturate to their host environment. The classic case study, on which Schumann based his model, is his research of Alberto, a poor and unskilled immigrant worker from Latin America (1976, 1978). Alberto's lack of success in progressing in the second language was explained through his social and psychological distance from target culture. For instance, Alberto lived in a neighborhood with other Latin Americans, and he "*chose* to work at night as well as in the day, rather than attend English classes..." (emphasis added, 1978, p. 97). One could question, however, how much Alberto's learning was hindered by his own choice and how much he was hindered by his unfavorable socio-economic status. A major drawback in such approaches is that the social position of the learner was not considered as a main factor in this analysis, nor were the opportunities for creating social relationships examined. In other words, this traditional exploration of the socio-psychological factors in second language acquisition assumed a strongly individualistic approach, where learners seemed to function in a social vacuum, and where the social interaction with others was absent.

Other, still popular models, for example, the Socio-Educational Model (Gardner, Lalonde, & Moorcroft, 1985; Gardner, 1988; Gardner & Lalonde, 1985), explaining extra-linguistic factors in second language learning such as motivation, have attracted similar criticism for being too unconcerned with the social surroundings of learners. Following the current, positivist trends and grand theories in psychology and sociology, these second language models have attempted to interpret complex, socio-psychological phenomena by building on one or two all-encompassing principles (social and psychological distance in one case; motivation on the other), thus describing a limited view of the relationships between second language achievement and external factors. The notion of motivation, for instance, simplifies learners' subjectivities and the multiple factors they have to navigate. The main problem with these approaches is that the voices of the subject (or the self, to use a broader and less jaded notion), the social structures in which she or he is located and constructive relations among them are non-existent. What is especially noteworthy of these positivist models of the self is that they firmly position the learner as the sole agent in the language learning experience. For instance, learners are either motivated to acquire a language or not. They either choose to acculturate and become members of the target language society or not. Recent postmodern developments in anthropology, psychology, and sociology, however, have rejected the belief that individual agency is, indeed, solely individual. Rather,

it could be viewed as the product of the interactions between one's desires, discourse, and socio-cultural milieu.

Only recently have second language acquisition studies welcomed trespassers along with more socially sensitive approaches and qualitative modes of inquiry. This acceptance of new theories and paradigms was marked by what Block (2003) termed *the social turn* in applied linguistics. In addition to the mainstream experimental methodology that still dominates the field, studies based on qualitative inquiry started shaping the discussion of second language learning in major journals. A notable example stems from the pioneering work of Bonny Norton Peirce (1995) who introduced poststructuralist theory in the analysis of identity, gender, and power relations among eight immigrant women in Canada. In her book, Norton (2000) tackled specifically the treatment of motivation as an extra-linguistic variable in the dominant second language acquisition literature. She claims that motivation has been problematic because it fails to account for the relations between power, identity, and language learning and proposes instead the concept *social investment*. By building on poststructuralist and critical discourse approaches to identity, Norton Peirce was among the first in the field of second language learning to introduce theoretical trespassers to second language learning, and, fortunately, she has not been the only one. Recent collections of studies (e.g., Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) have highlighted the struggle of immigrants' voices within multiple discourses and ideological implications for language learners.

A socially-grounded approach to the development of second language learners' identity is also prominent in the work of Pavlenko (2002), who offers an extensive outline of poststructuralist approaches in second language learning, and Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) who involve Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) theory. Lantolf (2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), in particular, has been highly influential in establishing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory – another trespasser – into second language studies and applied linguistics. Yet others (Canagarajah, 1993; Hall & Eddington, 2003; Pennycook, 2001; Toohey, 2003) have looked at larger socio-cultural and ideological phenomena that shape the way learners use the second language in the classroom through discourse practices. Pennycook, for example, contrasted critical applied linguistics with mainstream applied linguistics, showing that the former is concerned with viewing classrooms and texts not as politically isolated and autonomous, but relating them to questions of access, difference, power, and resistance. Studies also showed how the field had embraced different types of ethnographies that were more conducive to investigating the relations between discourse and power. Canagarajah's critical ethnography (*ibid.*) drew attention to the role of ideology in teaching sensitive aspects of culture and raised the issue of resistance in the English language classroom from a postcolonial perspective.

Toohy (2003), in a detailed, longitudinal ethnographic study of kindergarten immigrant children, demonstrated that young learners' classroom discourse is socially, historically, and ideologically constructed by inviting a range of trespassers to her framework, including social theorists, poststructuralists, Vygotsky, and Bakhtin's notion of dialogue to a complex analysis of interaction among young immigrant children.

Although the Russian thinker Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986b, 1993) is among the most recent newcomers to the field of second language acquisition, his concepts are not entirely estranged from second and foreign language researchers. For instance, Cazden (1989) offered an overview of how Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* and *dialogue* apply to second language acquisition. Hall (1995), in her re-conceptualization of face-to-face interaction, built heavily on Bakhtin's notions of the utterance, translinguistics, and dialogue, while Kramsch (1993) invoked Bakhtin's framework in the analysis of culture in foreign language learning and teaching. Dufva (1998) applied the notion of dialogue to the more cognitive aspects of foreign language learning. The increasing need for utilizing a new perspective to explain learning processes, both cognitively and socially, was illustrated by a recent volume on literacy in the first language (Ball & Freedman, 2004). Another volume (Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005) was the first one to include a variety of second and foreign language studies that explicitly use Bakhtin's framework as their theoretical basis. Recently, Kostogriz and Doecke (2007) employed the notion of otherness in Bakhtin and Levinas to offer specific implications for language teaching by suggesting a pedagogy based on the ethics of dialogic relations. Celebrating the value of difference in learning, a dialogically ethical pedagogy recognizes the power of the Other in shaping meanings.

Bakhtin may not be a complete stranger to applied linguistics any longer, but his work still remains on the periphery of the field as only a few isolated concepts, typically dialogue, heteroglossia, and polyphony, are used by scholars in both second language learning and literacy in the first language and, usually, in conjunction with other, broader socio-cultural approaches (e.g., Vygotsky). In contrast, this book positions Bakhtin's philosophy of language and the self at the center of a project investigating the subjectivity of immigrant learners of English as a second language. It argues that Bakhtin's non-unitary treatment of language and the self provides a thoughtful, thorough, and generative framework that allows us to coalesce such complex constructs as subjectivity, discourse, voice, gender, and agency. At its core, Bakhtin's framework is a multilayered theory of the novel as the landscape of human social relationships, but it also supplies us with a tool for analyzing a variety of discourses. One of the goals of this book is to demonstrate that Bakhtin's framework is particularly useful in the analysis of narrative discourse, narrative data, and ethnographic interviews. At the same time, in

accordance with Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, it also reaches to other influences such as postmodern views of identity and feminist poststructuralism.

The narrative examples in the book come from a longitudinal qualitative inquiry into eight well-educated Eastern European immigrants' experiences with English as a second language in the United States. The Statistical Yearbook of Homeland Security ("Yearbook of Immigration Statistics," 2008) shows that the number of immigrants from this part of the world has increased steadily in the post-communist era. Immigrants coming from these countries tend to be highly educated; yet, little is known about their patterns of language socialization. Hinkel (2000), summarizing research on Soviet immigrants and offering primarily a demographic and statistical perspective, concludes that they remain largely secluded from American social and political life. Here, I adopt a more introspective and emic perspective. Specifically, I employ a Bakhtinian framework in exploring four heterosexual couples' narratives to reveal how they enact their gendered subjectivities, and how they claim their agency in the second-language milieu. While gender as a socio-linguistic phenomenon has been studied by second language researchers, no other second language studies, to my knowledge, have investigated data elicited from couples. Because the participants were observed and interviewed as couples, the data and the discourse analyses provide an insight not only into how they construct their subjectivities through their narratives, but also into the pairs' interactional patterns.

Thus, the book has multiple, though interrelated goals. First, it outlines a Bakhtinian perspective in the understanding of subjectivity and agency in the second language in everyday contexts. Second, it illuminates how gender shapes the discursive practices of these couples. Yet another goal is to suggest a dialogic, discourse-centered analysis of the narrative as a research genre itself. As the significance of narrative as a type of data in applied linguistics is growing, it behooves us, more than ever, to consider and employ different approaches to its analysis. I believe that Bakhtin's philosophy, with its broad spectrum and versatility, will prove essential to narrative research. Bakhtin may be a newcomer to applied linguistics – a field that until very recently has cautiously guarded its theoretical and methodological parameters – but this newcomer is here to stay.

About the structure of this book

In this project, I have drawn largely on Bakhtin's philosophy, which abandons the traditional view of narrative as a linear, continuous structure and, instead, stresses the juxtaposition of multiple plots and voices. Peuter (1998) encapsulates the nature of narrative from a Bakhtinian perspective by claiming that, "Linearity and

order are disrupted as the subject is exposed from multiple perspectives, oppositional value-orientations co-exist, producing dynamic tensions which seek neither resolution nor assimilation (1998, p. 40). Similarly, Lather (1991) describes the postmodern text as collage or pastiche that is messy and changes positions, which are frequently incongruous with each other. In line with these theoretical perspectives, the structure of this book is not linear, either. Although the chapters are interconnected by the theme of gender and subjectivity, each portrays a different aspect of the participants' lived experiences. Thus, each chapter provides a brief background of the issue it discusses.

By focusing on Bakhtin's philosophy of language, Chapter One outlines the theoretical umbrella that has guided the data analysis underscoring that narratives are not acts of individual expression, but function as zones of dialogic constructions. Chapter Two introduces the longitudinal project that generated the narratives, its context, the questions it employed, and the eight participants. Chapter Three focuses on how the participants' discursive practices in the second language mediate their social positions and shows that being a linguistic Other has disempowering implications not only in the working environment but across all facets of everyday life. The narrative analysis of the participants' experiences reveals the complex interplay between gender, power, and the discourses that they employ in response to how others position them in the English-speaking milieu. Chapter Four begins by a more traditional approach to discourse analysis by illuminating how the men and women invest in the linguistic aspects of second language acquisition. For example, although the previous chapter focuses on how the men and women position themselves in relation to the Other, the native speaker of English, this particular chapter centers on how each of the participants positions him or herself within the respective couples. Their attitudes toward accuracy in the second language are linked with an analysis of the meta-linguistic discourses the men and women employ. Chapter Five examines the notion of culture and is centered on Bakhtin's (1984) argument that being means communicating dialogically and demonstrates how the notion of dialogism operates among second language learners.

Chapter Six zeroes in on how the participants construct agency in the second language. It highlights *understanding* and *creativity* – two other critical terms in Bakhtin's philosophy – as it illustrates the discourses the participants appropriate in their experiences. Both understanding and creativity are firmly grounded in the prosaic, seemingly ordinary practices of everyday life, which are, at the same time, at the core of our language-rich existence. This final chapter also provides a brief summary of the findings and illuminates once more the relevance of constructs that are discussed to the fields of applied linguistics. Recommendations for future research are offered as well.

A final note in the introduction is on the intended audience of this book. Because this text explores the intersections of language, gender, agency, and culture, I have targeted a broad audience of readers in the fields of applied linguistics, narrative studies, communication science, and, generally, anyone interested in the notion of subjectivity from a Bakhtinian perspective. Bakhtin's scope of work cannot be restricted to a single field, and I have not attempted to restrict the potential readership of this book singly to scholars and students of applied linguistics. The descriptive nature of the book would make it appropriate for graduate courses on language and identity, TESOL, or language and gender studies. Cultural anthropologists, cultural psychologists, and discourse analysts may also find the concepts discussed here relevant to their disciplines.

CHAPTER 1

Language, consciousness, and dialogical selves

An outline of theoretical underpinnings

Language lives only in the dialogic interaction
of those who make use of it.
Bakhtin (1984, p. 183)

Any true understanding is dialogic in nature.
Voloshinov (1973, p. 102)

Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside
the head of an individual person, it is born between people
collectively searching for truth, in the process
of their dialogic interaction.
Bakhtin (1984, p. 110)

“Where are you from?” is a question I have been asked often, mostly in a tone of genuine curiosity. However well-intended, it is always a blunt question. It is a question that comes with its speaker’s certainty of his or her right to ask it of the Other, the user of another language. Over the years, I have come up with different answers (some polite and serious, some humorous, some neither of the two). I have turned around and asked equally bluntly about the inquirer’s own geographic origin. I have also realized that the question about where we are from is inevitably about language, and how language intersects with our sense of selves. On the surface, the question is a fairly innocent and simple inquiry, but to me, and to other immigrants, it is marked by a flow of heavier undercurrents: Where is my home? Is it where I was born, or is it in my current country of citizenship? Is it where I am residing with my family? Or is my home wherever my professional community is – not necessarily as a physical place of work, but as a community of practice with its own discourse? Ultimately, it is a question of belonging: Who belongs where? Who and what (i.e., ancestry, race, even accent) decide whether we belong or not? Inevitably, it is a question of identity and of the factors that determine how we view ourselves. Is who we are as human beings determined by our nationality or ethnicity? Is it shaped by our gender? Is it determined by our occupation or socio-economic status? By what linguistic choices we make? And what, after all, does *identity* itself signify?

The last question about what constitutes our selfhood has not elicited a uniform answer. Identity, as a construct, has been discussed by psychologists, anthropologists, social scientists, and philosophers. It could be as simply defined as in Sarup's (1996) statement that our identity is whatever story we tell about ourselves and the story others tell about us. Its definition could also be more elaborate as in cultural anthropologists Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain's (1998) description: "Identities are key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them. They are important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being" (p. 5). In this definition, Holland and her colleagues link identity with agency and assert that the latter is not some lofty concept, but is related to events that happen "daily and mundanely" (p. 5). Today, we know that identity is, indeed, inherently related to other social factors such as gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, race, and not least of all, language or the language variety that we use. Poststructuralist scholars (Davies, 2000) have even argued that a true, core identity does not actually exist. Instead, they forward the notion that we display different fragments of ourselves, depending on the settings we occupy or the discourses we need to take up.

There are numerous conceptions of what personhood means, and its meaning has varied along with the changing schools of thought. I have singled out the definitions of identity above because they resonate best with Bakhtin's concept of the self: the self as a story and as possessing a limitless creativity and potential. These two characteristics are at the core of Bakhtin's formation of the speaking subject. They were also what I found to be crucial in the construction of selves in the narratives produced by the participants in my own research. Our lives are stories, and we are the ones who are authoring these stories creatively, responsibly, and reflectively. In this chapter, I outline the essential concepts in Bakhtin's understanding of the self and language. It is not meant to be an exhaustive introduction to his work, but to help establish the grounds for the discussion of narrative examples that follow in the rest of the chapters and, at the same time, to help situate his specific framework in the larger body of writings on the conceptions of language and the person. In addition, I explain several of Bakhtin's major notions, making connections to narrative analysis and their value in qualitative research.

1.1 Overview of Bakhtin's framework

Who is Mikhail Bakhtin? Why has it been so difficult to define his framework neatly within a particular trend or school? Is he a neo-Kantian? Can we claim that he is a postmodernist as some scholars within the field of second language

acquisition have implied? Bakhtin's work has fascinated researchers in various disciplines such as socio-cultural studies (Holquist, 1990), philosophy (Gardiner, 2000), anthropology (Holland et al., 1998), composition studies (Halasek, 1999), and literacy (Hicks, 1996b) to list only a few. Yet, even today, the nature of Bakhtin's work remains unique and resistant to categorization. He shares features of poststructuralists, but he is not, strictly speaking, a poststructuralist. His name is often cited along with Vygotsky's in educational research, yet the main ideas in these two thinkers are fairly distinct. To complicate matters further, Bakhtinian scholars do not always agree on the authorship of major texts associated with his circle as illustrated in the disputes over who wrote *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, whether it was Bakhtin himself or his close associates from the Bakhtin Circle. (For an in-depth discussion and a convincing argument that these two books were authored by Voloshinov and Medvedev respectively, please see Hirschkop, 1999).

Even details of his biography elude scholars and are a source of confusion. For instance, Hirschkop (1999) refers to Bakhtin's aristocratic, albeit impoverished, origin that others mention (e.g., see Todorov, 1984) as a myth. Biographers agree that his father worked at a bank, but whether his origin was noble remains unclear. Bakhtin's formal education has been another mysterious area. While commonly accepted that he studied philology at the University of Odessa first and then in Petrograd, Hirschkop claims that no official records of his attendance have been found. Bakhtin himself was not very forthcoming about his personal life and didn't volunteer information. Instead, he isolated himself in the company of a close circle of friends. He never left a convenient, formal statement on his philosophical beliefs, so his scholars have had to search for these within the body of his writings – a task not made easier by the fact that Bakhtin's views and key terminology were quite distinct in the periods before and after his famous publication on Dostoevsky (Bakhtin, 1979).

To those closely familiar with Bakhtin's life and professional history, the confusion surrounding his thought is not surprising. In their comprehensive account of Mikhail Bakhtin's biography, Clark and Holquist (1984) reflect that the difficulty to describe his view on a number of issues stems largely from his own personality. He presented himself as "elusive, contradictory, and enigmatic" (p. 2). He refused to follow any official traditions, ideologies, or schools. Even though Bakhtin chose the genre of the novel as the ground for his analysis of discourse and the self, he rejected the notion that he was a literary critic. Instead, he identified himself as a philosopher and a thinker. In a famous interview, retold by Emerson (1997), Bakhtin's own succinct and unambiguous answer to Duvakin's question about whether he was a philologist or a philosopher was, "I am a philosopher. A thinker" (Emerson, p. 6).

Yet, the introductory section of a Russian collection of essays dedicated to Bakhtin, *M. M. Bakhtin as a Philosopher* (*M. M. Bakhtin Kak Filosof*) (Gogotishvili & Gurevich, 1992), points out that the philosophic essence of his work remains a mystery. While one can trace influences of the Marburg school and German phenomenology, especially in Bakhtin's early work, his philosophy defies the strict delineations of schools and trends. His conceptions of the self and language have placed him on the border of different dominant thoughts – just as Bakhtin conceived the nature of the subject to be never singular but always on the borderland of viewpoints and languages. In the intellectual currents between modernity and postmodernity, Bakhtin's scholarship has carved a unique space for itself and its followers. This uniqueness has prompted Bakhtinian theorists to consider him the creator not just of a theory but of a “programme for the humanities in general,” and it is what Makhlin aptly calls a “social ontology of participation” (1997). The reference to “participation” here rejects the conventional portrayal of the subject as an autonomous one and underscores Bakhtin's key concept of agency as a process that is answerable to others. It is also a rejection of the very core of formalism and its treatment of language.

Although Bakhtin's philosophy eludes strict definitions, it was still located in a specific intellectual and ideological climate with its very specific history and place. This inherent connection between life and socio-political realities was clearly recognized and expressed in the early writings of Bakhtin's own circle, produced in the early twentieth century. Medvedev (2000), for instance, asserted in *Formal Method of Literary Scholarship*:

Literature always represents a person, his life and fate, his “inner world” through an ideological worldview; everything (in literature) is accomplished in the [larger] scope of ideological entities and values. The ideological context is an atmosphere in which life can happen only as an object of a literary representation. (p. 199, translation mine)

One of the first major theoretical tasks for the Bakhtin Circle, with Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Voloshinov as its key figures, was to establish their view of the importance of language and how it differs from the dominant formalist approaches. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, originally published in 1929, Voloshinov's (1973) central claim is that language is a social phenomenon, and thus, it is impossible to separate it from the social values that imbue any linguistic expressions. Linguistic signs are the major unit of analysis in formalism, and they are quite abstract by nature. In contrast, Voloshinov claims that linguistic signs, along with all other signs and symbols, are never neutral. Signs are materialistic and concrete; they not only represent reality but they may distort or change reality, depending on the purpose of their user. While Voloshinov's book bows to the