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## **Whose Words Are These Anyway?**

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### **Abstract**

Is there, according to Bakhtin, such a thing as nobody’s or neutral words? Going over Bakhtin’s writings we might encounter an intriguing variety of answers to this question, ranging from a clear negative – there is no such thing – to a radical positive – all words are neutral, are “nobody’s” – and with a few other variants in between. This paper examines this puzzle both in its own right and from the perspective of what it can teach us about reading Bakhtin’s texts. I propose that Bakhtin’s conception of language has remained stable (even if not quite unchanged) in works from all periods, and link this conception to his early ethical philosophy (with an emphasis on the influence of Søren Kierkegaard on it). Bakhtin is firmly committed to the position that nobody’s words exist only in the abstract world of theory, and not in language as we speak it. This description also pertains to his own writing, which I maintain should be approached with a view to how other people’s voices are manipulated in it, rather than in the more literal fashion, in which scholarly works are usually studied.

**Keywords:** Bakhtin, Mikhail; Dialogism; Structuralism

## Whose Words Are These Anyway?

### 1. The Puzzle of Nobody's Words

Look at the following quotations:

Words belong to nobody (Бахтин 1996б: 188).<sup>1</sup>

The words of language are nobody's (Бахтин 1996б: 192).

No neutral, 'nobody's' words remain in language (Бахтин 1975: 106).

There are no voiceless, nobody's, words (Бахтин 1996д: 332).

After all, there are no words belonging to nobody (Бахтин 1996д: 334–335).

In addition to neutral words, nobody's words, language has many words that are alien or semi-alien to the speaker (Бахтин 1996в: 229).

Here and elsewhere Bakhtin seems to claim all words in language or none of them or some of them, in some aspect, are “nobody's”, or “neutral”, or “taken from the dictionary”. These are very distinctive turns of phrase, and their use in such a contradictory fashion, does not seem to be accidental.<sup>2</sup> What is he up to?

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Russian are my own.

<sup>2</sup> See also e.g. Бахтин (1996б: 181, 191), Бахтин (1996в: 225). All these turns of phrase refer back to the same brief passage in “Discourse in the Novel” (Бахтин 1975: 106). Indeed, when working on “The Problem of Speech Genres” (Бахтин 1996б) Bakhtin reread and summarized the relevant part of “Discourse in the Novel”, then still an unpublished manuscript (see Бахтин 1996в: 224–226, 230), so similarities between these two texts are to be expected, and contrasts between them, as the one we are looking at, are all the more striking.

There are two questions here. There is the question of what Bakhtin is trying to say about nobody's words, and there is the question of interpreting Bakhtin's writing given such apparent contradictions.<sup>3</sup> I will begin with looking at the former.

One solution to the puzzle was suggested by Vladimir Alpatov (Алпатов 2001, 2005: 274–348) and Mika Lähtenmäki (2003). On their view, in earlier works (Волошинов 1929, Бахтин 1975: 72–113) Bakhtin and Voloshinov radically rejected the notion of language-as-system and Saussure's (1983) distinction between *langue* and *parole*, while in later works (Бахтин 1996б, 2001, 1996в, 1972: 309–316) Bakhtin acknowledged the existence of the system of language.

Indeed, in the 1930s Bakhtin writes:

Due to the work of all these stratifying forces, no neutral, “nobody's” words and forms remain in language: it has all been robbed away, penetrated with intentions, accentuated. Language, for the consciousness living in it, is not an abstract system of normative forms, but rather a concrete heteroglot opinion about the world (Бахтин 1975: 106).

The rejection of neutral words is here synonymous with the rejection of language as an abstract system. A quotation from twenty years later looks different:

Language as a system does, of course, have a rich arsenal of lingual [языковые] – lexical, morphological, syntactic – means for expressing the emotional-evaluative position of the speaker, but all these means, being means of language, are absolutely *neutral* with respect to any particular real evaluation (Бахтин 1996б: 188).

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<sup>3</sup> Such apparent contradictions in Bakhtin's writings are not limited to the subject discussed here, and are quite common, especially in his later works. Gogotishvili notes many of them in her commentary to texts in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> volumes of Bakhtin's Collected Writings (Гоготишвили, 1996, 2002).

Here words belong to language as a system, and are all neutral, so, seemingly, Bakhtin has indeed changed his mind.

On closer examination, though, the proposed solution to our puzzle looks less plausible. First – a point I shall return to below – the two passages seem to make the very same point: language-as-a-system is incapable of carrying people’s intentions. Secondly, some of the quotations in which Bakhtin denies the existence of nobody’s words (Бахтин 1996д: 332, 334–335) are from the late period (1961).<sup>4</sup> Actually, in “The Problem of Speech Genres” alone we can find the full range of statements: those claiming all words are neutral or “taken from the dictionary”, those denying any are, and some in-between options too (Бахтин 1996б: 181, 188, 191, 192).

Neither do works from the early period present a simple picture. “[T]here are and there can be no neutral utterances” (Бахтин 2003б: 300), writes Bakhtin in 1924, and indeed, Bakhtin consistently denies the neutrality of *utterances* (высказывания) in all periods. But on the same page we find:

Only thus: by isolating and freeing *the purely lingual moment of discourse* [СЛОВО] and by creating *a new lingual unity* and its own concrete subdivisions, does linguistics methodically master its object – *a language indifferent to values lying outside the realm of linguistics* (ibid).

And shortly afterwards:

[S]till completely undeveloped is the department [of linguistics] that should be dealing with large discursive [СЛОВЕСНЫЕ] wholes: lengthy everyday utterances,

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<sup>4</sup> A later statement (probably from 1964 or 1965) shows no more signs of compromise with the notion of language-as-system (or in the vocabulary of Soviet structuralism – as code): “Semiotics deals mostly with the transmission of a readymade message using a readymade code. In living speech, on the other hand, the message is strictly speaking first created in the process of transmission and *there is essentially no code*” (Бахтин 2002б: 380; emphasis added).

dialogue, the speech, the treatise, the novel, etc. – as *these utterances too can and should be defined and studied purely linguistically* as lingual phenomena (Бахтин 2003б: 301; emphasis added).

At first glance this looks like the greatest compromise Bakhtin has ever made with Saussure. In fact, though, Saussure and the *langue/parole* distinction are irrelevant to understanding this passage.<sup>5</sup> There is another distinction at work here – that between the responsible deed and theory (Бахтин 2003а).

## 2. Bakhtin's Existentialist Philology<sup>6</sup>

To explain what is going on in the passage quoted above, and suggest my own solution to the puzzle of nobody's words, I should talk briefly about what Bakhtin inherited from an important source of influence – Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>7</sup>

In an early entry in his *Journal*, often cited as a motto for his philosophical project, Kierkegaard wrote:

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind *what I am to do*, not what I am to know [...] the thing is to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find *the idea for which I can live and die*. What would be the use of discovering so-called objective truth, [...]

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<sup>5</sup> The earliest known mention of Saussure's name anywhere in a Bakhtin Circle text dates to 1928 (Волошинов 1995: 89). Alpatov (Алпатов 2005: 89–93) convincingly argues that it is likely Bakhtin and Voloshinov did not even read Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* before the summer or even autumn of 1928.

<sup>6</sup> The very apt phrase “existentialist philology” was used to describe Bakhtin's work, in a somewhat different context, by Clark and Holquist (1984: 9).

<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin openly cited Kierkegaard as one of the most important formative influences on him (Бахтин 2002а: 41–43), but Kierkegaard's influence has been hidden in plain view and received surprisingly little attention from Bakhtin scholars. One notable exception to this rule is the work of Tatiana Schittsova (e.g. Щитцова 1995, Щитцова 1999).

what good would it do me to be able to develop a theory of the state and combine all the details into a single whole, and so construct a world in which I did not live, but only held up to the view of others; – what good would it do me to be able to explain the meaning of Christianity if it had *no* deeper significance *for me and for my life* (Kierkegaard 1959: 44)

It is easy to misconstrue Kierkegaard as taking sides in some philosophical dichotomy: preferring doing over knowing or the subjective over the objective. But such a reading would miss the point. Had he possessed a complete psychological theory of the mind and of human action, even one purporting to account for his own subjectivity and his own actions, such a theory would still offer “a world in which [he] did not live, but only held up to the view of others”.

Kierkegaard here breaks not with some philosophical dogma, but with what was traditionally the *purpose* of philosophizing. Traditionally, philosophy has sought objective truth. But Kierkegaard asks for that which is true *for* the individual. He wants philosophy to be relevant to the unique perspective, experience and purposes of the individual and finds this unique individual perspective to be more essential and primordial than what is objectively true, i.e. than what is true *potentially* for anybody, but not *actually* for anybody in particular (Kierkegaard 1941: 282ff).

In this Bakhtin was a true follower of Kierkegaard. This is especially evident in his early ethical philosophy (Бахтин 2003а), with the distinction, central to it, between the deed [поступок] and theory. All theory purports to solidify objective truth, create a model of (one aspect or another of) objective reality. But such a model has no place in it for our own position in the world, for how we live and act in it. Let me illustrate.

A map of the world is a theoretical representation of the Earth’s surface. It is objectively correct. Any location on Earth is represented on the map, including the place where I am now standing. But then, any point on the map is as good as any other. The way *I* see things, my experience of space, my *purview*, is not map-like. I am situated *here*. My space has a real *center*, and a real *focus*, two points unlike all others – *from* which and *at* which I am looking. A map has no focus, and any arbitrary point may be at its center. A map is a *theoretical* representation of *potential* space, representing *objective content*

that anybody might experience. I live, see and move in space in a way that is *real* for me, that *I*, not just anybody, *actually* experience.<sup>8</sup>

Like Kierkegaard, Bakhtin gives the individually unique, the deed, precedence over the objective and theoretical. Space as it exists for me is a more basic reality than space as a potential theoretical construct. His main argument in support of this claim is that the reality of the deed is inaccessible to a philosophy that only accepts as valid objective theoretical statements, but that the reverse is not the case: a philosophy that has the deed as its starting point subsumes under it all things theoretical (Бахтин 2003а: 29). The map cannot tell the place where I am situated from a place where nobody is, but I experience all the aspects of reality that the map represents. Lived space contains all the objective features of space accessible to theory,<sup>9</sup> but no theory, no matter how advanced, will ever be able to contain the simple fact of me experiencing space and living in it.

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<sup>8</sup> This illustration somewhat downplays the *active* and *axiological* aspects of Bakhtin's concept of the deed. For early Bakhtin actual living experience is a deed in its own right (Бахтин 2003а: 32), but a deed goes beyond experience. Our lived experience is not merely situated, organized around a *here* and a *now*; it is also value-laden: we experience things as *good* or *bad*, *important* or *unimportant*; we experience places as *home* or *away*, *familiar* or *foreign*, etc. Moreover, experiencing is just a prelude to doing (and Bakhtin talks about the philosophy of *the deed*, not the philosophy of experience), so our stance in the world is active and engaged, geared to our local *purposes* and broader *aims*.

<sup>9</sup> And these features indeed remain objective. Bakhtin explicitly eschews relativism in this context (Бахтин 2003а: 14ff, 29ff). To use Bakhtin's own analysis of Pushkin's poem "Parting" (I am citing the earlier analysis, Бахтин 2003а: 60–66) as an example – geographical theory can tell us the distance between Odessa, where Pushkin's beloved is boarding a ship, and the port in Italy to which she is sailing. It cannot tell us that her destination is home to her, and what this means to her, nor that it is a land foreign to him, and what this means to him. Bakhtin would insist that this difference in perspective and valuation is more essential than, takes philosophical precedence over, the fact that objectively the distance is self-same for both of them. But then Bakhtin would also say that the distance is objective and remains the same for both; it is indeed experienced and lived by them, in their own unique ways, *as* objective, *as* the same for everybody. A relativist, on the other hand, would rather try to claim that the distance itself is somehow different for the two different people, that it is somehow not objective.

This is not a rejection of all theory, but a rejection of theoretism. The map represents features of space that are potentially present in people's living experience of it. Such features are rightfully and duly studied by the theoretical sciences (in this case geography). The error of theoretism is that it takes those features alone to be the whole of reality. On a theoretist view, the map would represent real space, and lived space would be reduced to the status of an accidental derivative or instantiation of theoretical space. On Bakhtin's account, on the other hand, space as represented in a map is derived by way of abstraction from lived space; the latter is the reality underlying the former, not *vice versa*.<sup>10</sup>

But, coming back to our main issue, where does Bakhtin place language? Tradition tells us that words denote general terms and that therefore language is suited to express abstract statements. The deed, being unique and concrete, must on such a view be ineffable,<sup>11</sup> but linguistics as a discipline has in the objective and abstract significations of words and their combinations a clear object of study.

Bakhtin breaks with this tradition: "Language has historically grown in the service of participative thinking and the deed", he writes, "and it begins to serve abstract thought only in the present day of its history" (Бахтин 2003а: 31). Bakhtin thus understands language itself to be in essence unique and concrete, rather than abstract. An utterance, itself a deed, is thus never neutral, always goes beyond the objective and theoretical.

So there are no neutral utterances, as the passage from Бахтин (2003б: 300–301), quoted at the end of the previous section, states. But what about the *theoretical* study of language? Bakhtin's claim that linguistics should study utterances as neutral can now be

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<sup>10</sup> I have of course omitted from this brief exposition of Bakhtin's early philosophy one of the most crucial ingredients – the place of the *other*, without which neither objectivity nor subjectivity is possible.

<sup>11</sup> Georg Simmel and Max Scheler – two thinkers who influenced Bakhtin's early philosophy quite a bit (see e.g. Brandist 2002), while using other concepts than Bakhtin's *deed*, adhered to this position. On Scheler see Crosby (1998: 26); on Simmel see Гоготишвили (2003: 480).



clarified. Linguistics is a theoretical science, and as such it can study the aspects of language that are the objective and neutral content of the utterance.<sup>12</sup>

Bakhtin finds nothing wrong with the theoretical study of language *per se*. But when theory attempts to claim for its abstraction the status of ultimate reality, when it turns into theoretism, it is bound to fail. In that same passage from 1924 Bakhtin calls such a theoretist approach to linguistics “a metaphysical bias (the substantialization and real reification of discourse [слово])”, and demands that linguistics “consistently [liberate] itself” from it, so that it can “work its way toward its object [...] and first [become] a science” (Бахтин 2003б: 301).

This metaphysical bias is exactly what Bakhtin and Voloshinov resent in Saussure’s *langue/parole* distinction, because it finds the ultimate reality of language in the system (*langue*) while what we really say (*parole*) is seen as an inessential individual instantiation, fraught with error, of the ideal system.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, what Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle protest against, already in the early period, is not the *langue/parole* distinction as such, but rather the metaphysical bias that it embodies. They clearly accept that utterances have objective lingual content, which

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<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin does not clarify at that point what these objective aspects are; indeed, in that same passage (Бахтин 2003б: 301) he claims that linguistics itself is yet to find its proper object of study. Later on, as Lähteenmäki (2001: 75ff) notes, Bakhtin uses in this context the distinction between the given and the created in the utterance (Бахтин 1996д: 330–331). Indeed, in the early period the human sciences in general do not fit easily into Bakhtin’s conceptual mold: it is easy to distinguish between the deed and objective content when we are talking about the sort of content studied by geography, but what would be the objective content studied by linguistics, or psychology? As we shall see, Bakhtin later refines his approach, making the philosophy of the human sciences the focus of several of his late notes.

<sup>13</sup> This is in line with the way Saussure’s ideas were received in the linguistics of the time, whether or not it was indeed Saussure’s position (a separate debate I shall not delve into). In any case, in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Волошинов 1929: 61–62) the quotations from Saussure that introduce the *langue/parole* distinction stress the primacy of *langue* and the peripheral position of *parole*. Note also that the issue at stake in this passage, just as in the 1924 passage discussed above, is that of defining the proper object of linguistics.

linguistics should study.<sup>14</sup> It is the proposed primacy of this content over the actual use of language which they reject.

### 3. Changing accents for changing circumstances

Generally speaking, this remains Bakhtin's position in the late period, but the accents within it, or rather, the tactics of presenting it, change over time. I will note here only one factor that affected these tactics, by no means the only one and probably one of the most superficial.

To cut a long and complex story short and simplistic,<sup>15</sup> the 1930s and 1940s were the heyday of Marrism in Soviet linguistics. Marrism, among other things, was a doctrine committed to viewing language as a motley of different dialects, each belonging to the ideology of a different class. A soviet linguist openly opposing this view risked retribution. But the hegemony of Marrism came to an abrupt end when Stalin intervened with a series of articles in *Pravda* (Сталин 1950), denouncing Marr and the Marrists and proclaiming the “unity of national language”. Now it became dangerous to adhere to the position that language belongs to class ideology.<sup>16</sup>

Writing in the 1930s, Bakhtin could go straight to his main point: language is ultimately what people say and write in their dialogue with one another; words are there to serve people's deeds. A statement like the one quoted above from Бахтин (1975: 106: “Due to the work of all these stratifying forces, no neutral, ‘nobody’s’ words and forms

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<sup>14</sup> The seemingly more radical text of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* is no exception. See Волошинов (1929: 102).

<sup>15</sup> For a knowledgeable and detailed exposition of these events and their effects on Soviet linguistics in the context of examining Bakhtin's writings, see Алпатов (2005: 215–225).

<sup>16</sup> Stalin's direct influence on Soviet linguistics was all but gone soon after his death in 1953, but his intervention also helped propel Viktor Vinogradov to the status of the dean of Soviet philologists – a status he kept, to some extent, until his death in 1969. It should be noted that Vinogradov was consistently interpreted in Bakhtin Circle works (esp. Волошинов 1930) as a follower of Saussure.

remain in language”) sounds both eloquent and Marxist. The secondary question of how language could legitimately be approached by linguistic theory had to be neglected, though. The objective and neutral (and thus class-independent) content of the utterance, which can be studied by linguistic theory, was better left unmentioned.<sup>17</sup>

In the early 1950s the landscape changed, and we get statements like this:

The words of language are nobody’s, but at the same time we only hear them in particular individual utterances, read them in particular individual writings, and here words already possess not only typical expression, but also individual expression (Бахтин 1996б: 192).

Stalin’s articles and the anti-Marxist campaign that followed made any direct statement to the effect that there are no neutral words risky. Language had now to be divorced from ideology. Bakhtin thus starts from stating that words *in language* are nobody’s. This is in line with the anti-Marxist spirit of the times. However, we only encounter these words in other people’s utterances, where they always carry the expression of some person or other.<sup>18</sup> Emphasizing that language is an instrument of *interaction* (общение) – a claim made by Stalin as well – Bakhtin gives the utterance precedence over the sentence and the word. In his own early terms – he again stresses the primacy of the *real* deed over the *potential possibility* contemplated by theory.

In the 1950s Bakhtin could not tackle the “metaphysical bias” potentially inherent in the notion of language-as-system head-on.<sup>19</sup> He could, however, reframe the distinction

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<sup>17</sup> Another, considerably more significant, sacrifice to the demands of the time in works from the 1930s, up to and including the dissertation on Rabelais, might have had to do with deemphasizing the personalist aspect of Bakhtin’s thought in favor of “the major *nameless* fates of artistic discourse” (Бахтин 1975: 72, emphasis added). But that is a separate discussion.

<sup>18</sup> This, in fact, is not that much different from what Bakhtin claimed in the 1930s: “Language, *for the consciousness living in it*, is not an abstract system of normative forms, but rather a concrete heteroglot opinion about the world” (Бахтин 1975: 106; emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> As noted in passing above – he returned to that point in the 1960s, responding to the new

between language and speech in a way that would echo his own position, affirming the primacy of speech, understood as actual dialogical interaction, over language, understood as the legitimate abstraction of whatever is repeatable and self-identical in interaction.<sup>20</sup> Insisting on the primacy of the utterance and speech interaction over the sentence and language-as-system again means insisting on the primacy of the deed over theory, and thus rejecting theoretism and the metaphysical bias in linguistics.

But let us not overstate the stability of Bakhtin's outlook. Over the years Bakhtin has subtly reformulated his understanding of theory, with a focus on the human sciences. A pivotal text from the early 1940s begins thus:

Knowledge of the thing and knowledge of the personality. They must be characterized as limits (Бахтин 1996а: 7).

The sharp divide between theory and the deed is here drawn in smoother lines (clearly inspired by Dilthey): theoretical knowledge can aspire to knowing its object *as a thing* – to *causally explain* it, to describe it with *precision* – or it can aspire to knowing its object *as a person* – to *understand* that person in *depth* (Бахтин 1996а).<sup>21</sup>

A science may aspire to reach any of these limits, but metaphysical bias is still a danger, the danger of studying the person as if it were a thing:

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generation of Soviet structuralists, primarily through criticizing the notion of “code”.

<sup>20</sup> Bakhtin took pains to stress that his distinction between language and speech is different from that made by Saussure (e.g. Бахтин 2001: 26). In this he could rely on a wider and older tradition in Russian linguistics, originating from J.I. Baudouin de Courtenay, who proposed a distinction between language and speech, a precursor of Saussure's *langue/parole* distinction, as early as 1870 (see Brandist, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> In the late 1950s Bakhtin returns to the philosophy of the human sciences, and we see, among other things, these two limits reappear as “The two poles of the text” (Бахтин 1996г: 308).

The being of the whole, the being of the human soul, freely revealing itself to our act of knowledge, cannot be bound by this act in any significant aspect. One may not transfer the categories of knowing the thing onto them (the sin of metaphysics) (Бахтин 1996а: 8).

Bakhtin's late philosophy opens up the possibility of *dialogical human science*, that is of a theory that treats its object of study dialogically.<sup>22</sup> A dialogical linguistics studies the person in the utterance, rather than the system in the sentence. It views language as embodying the voices of persons at any point and seeks to understand these voices and the meaning of the dialogical relations between them. Eventually (Бахтин 1996г, 1972: 309–316), Bakhtin came to call this not-yet-established science “metalinguistics”.

#### **4. A few comments on reading Bakhtin**

The puzzle of nobody's words gives grounds for some reflection on how to approach Bakhtin's writing. Bakhtin's texts often have the form and style of ordinary scholarly works, and it is tempting to treat them as such, but appearances are misleading.<sup>23</sup>

This is especially true with regard to Bakhtin's inconsistent or even volatile use of terminology. The same “term” may mean different things even in similar contexts. It can be vividly seen on the example of the contrasting quotations that form the puzzle of nobody's words:<sup>24</sup> When Bakhtin says all words in *language* belong to nobody he refers

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<sup>22</sup> It might even be argued that the concept of dialogue only truly becomes central in Bakhtin's philosophy in the late period (see Шигцова 2002, who suggests that the concept of dialogue is relatively secondary in Bakhtin's early philosophy, playing second fiddle to the more central concept of the event).

<sup>23</sup> Partly, of course, this has to do with the fact that most of Bakhtin's writings are drafts and notes rather than texts he has prepared for publication. Nevertheless, it seems to me, these are not the kind of drafts and notes that would be produced in the usual kind of scholarly writing.

<sup>24</sup> Here and below I will only use the passages and themes already examined above to substantiate my claims about Bakhtin's writing. Space does not allow me to look at additional examples here, although these are not hard to find.

to language-as-system, but when he says that *language* has no “nobody’s” words, he refers to language as we actually speak and hear it.

But reading the same passages in context, indeed *reading* them, rather than *studying* them, we can see Bakhtin is making the same point in both. As I noted in passing above, both in Бахтин (1975: 106) and in Бахтин (1996б: 188, 192) Bakhtin argues for the inadequacy of language-as-system for carrying people’s intentions and expression.

This brings me to my next point: *a simple understanding* of what Bakhtin writes, in context, is generally a good guide to the text. When Bakhtin wrote his texts he did not imagine his readers to be professional Bakhtin scholars. Bakhtin’s later writings are visibly critical of the notion of language-as-system. One could only come to note that Bakhtin does not totally deny the existence of the system of language in them through comparison with earlier Bakhtin Circle texts.<sup>25</sup> A largely rhetorical difference in the method of exposition and in secondary accents is thus inflated into a supposed major change in Bakhtin’s conception of language. Such an interpretation is merely an artifact of applying the usual method of “close reading” (Lähteenmäki 2003: 24) to Bakhtin’s writing, where it does not fit.<sup>26</sup>

So, is there no basis at all for comparing different Bakhtin Circle works to one another? Not at all. But such comparisons should be based not simply on the way words are used, not on a literal understanding of the texts, but rather on what Bakhtin himself (following Kant) has called in his early writings “architectonics”.

Comparison across periods often yields insights when guided by similarity of the described phenomenon or relation; not necessarily of the term used. Thus, in comparing Bakhtin’s philosophy of language with his early ethical work, we see “language” presented on one occasion as a form of the deed (also referred to as utterance, person,

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, Bakhtin would not have imagined at the time that such comparisons will ever be made.

<sup>26</sup> Again, to stress and to avoid misunderstanding, I am not trying to claim that Bakhtin’s positions in general remained constant; I am merely claiming that in this particular case the supposed change in his position is illusory.

the created), on another as the theoretical transcription (or abstraction) thereof, on a third as the objective content of the deed (or the given in it). The word “language” means something different in each case, but it is used every time to paint another detail in a similar philosophical picture. The truly interesting insights into Bakhtin’s thought and its development await us when we look at how these details or architectonic positions are filled and sometimes modified over time.

Finally, there is the question of how the ideas and terminology of other scholars are reflected in Bakhtin’s writing. Bakhtin claims that the discourse of others plays a crucial role in any utterance. Indeed, this is the point he makes in the passages we have been discussing: we can only express ourselves through the words of others. To follow on an image Bakhtin suggests cryptically in his late notes (Бахтин 2002б: 420), the author of a text is akin to the conductor of an orchestra, who creates the unique interpretation and performance of the piece played, but plays no instrument, has no sound other than the coordinated sound of the instruments played by others.<sup>27</sup>

Applying this understanding of the utterance to Bakhtin’s own works means paying attention not only to what other voices are present, but also to how they are manipulated to make Bakhtin’s own point. And while other people’s voices make up any utterance, Bakhtin’s writings often present a case in which the use of other people’s voices is deliberate, that is, his writings are often double-voiced.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin originally contrasts the conductor not with the players but with the composer – the author is rather the interpreter of the work of another, the second voice overlaid on another’s first, than the author of a naïve first voice (and cf. Бахтин 1996г: 314).

<sup>28</sup> Lähteenmäki (2003: 27–31) strongly opposes Gogotishvili’s claim (in Гоготишвили, 1996), as he reconstructs it, that Bakhtin’s linguistic works from the 1950s are double-voiced. But, to be more precise, Lähteenmäki criticizes the suggestion that these late works are double-voiced, *while earlier works* (e.g. “Discourse in the Novel”) *are not*. This is not the claim I am making (and to the best of my understanding, this is also not the claim Gogotishvili is making). With the possible exception of the early philosophical manuscripts, Bakhtin’s writing is double-voiced in all periods. This is, actually, not very remarkable. Double-voiced discourse is a very common phenomenon in both writing and speech, and there is no reason to suppose Bakhtin, who was among the first to describe it, and who worked under conditions that called for indirect forms of expression, did not use it intentionally on very many

Take again the passage in Бахтин (1975: 106). It was written in the heyday of Marrism and a *bona fide* Marrist would agree.<sup>29</sup> But behind this veneer there is a rather different philosophical position. Words carry intentions, and these intentions, even when they are typical for a social group, belong to individuals rather than to social groups as such. The personalism of Bakhtin's early and late works has not gone, but here it is spoken with the words of the Marrists.

This is not to say Marrism here is *only* veneer. In his exposition of the concept of double-voicedness (Бахтин 1972: 316–341) Bakhtin classifies double-voiced discourse according to the relations between the two voices in it. Double-voiced discourse may be closer to the monodirectional (both voices agree) or to the polydirectional (the two voices disagree) type and the other's voice may be active to various degrees.

In our case, the Marrist voice plays a complex role, but one may say that it points roughly in the same direction as Bakhtin's. Bakhtin hitches a ride, as it were, on the authoritative Marrist position to promote his own. We see him arguing for it with some pathos and eloquence.<sup>30</sup>

Compare that to his later writings. Here the interplay of voices is even more complex,<sup>31</sup> but let us focus only on what we have already been looking at, Bakhtin's treatment of the notion of language-as-system and of nobody's words.

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occasions.

<sup>29</sup> Note especially the mention of "stratification" and surrounding talk of social groups and classes.

<sup>30</sup> Take the almost indignant tone of this remark, originally in parentheses: "[A]fter all, it's not from the dictionary that the word is taken by the speaker!" (Бахтин 1975: 106), or the graphic description, already quoted from the same page, of language having been "robbed away".

<sup>31</sup> The Marrist voice is still there, but this time as a position to be actively avoided, while making points that may appear Marrist to potential readers. There is also the overt presence of Stalin in the early 1950s, the less overt but more pervasive presence of Vinogradov (emphasized in Гоготшвили 1996), the mostly overt, but rather complex relationship with Saussure (and other structuralists) and Vossler and his school, and others. For simplicity of exposition I will here lump together Stalin, Vinogradov and the structuralists into the collective persona of "mainstream linguistics".



Bakhtin nominally agrees with mainstream linguistics in that he does not openly dispute the existence of the system of language, populated by neutral words and sentences. But the role the voice of mainstream linguistics plays in the double-voiced construction is different. The existence of language-as-system is acknowledged, but not argued for.<sup>32</sup> Vivid and passionate arguments are reserved not for defending the idea of language-as-system, but for showing its inadequacy. Bakhtin argues at length that words and sentences are meaningless outside the context of a complete utterance, that they can carry no expression.<sup>33</sup>

Such claims in fact undermine the position of mainstream linguistics.<sup>34</sup> They fly in the face of the justifications Saussure (1983: 8–20) gives for separating out the system of language from speech: rather than being an independent well-defined object, on which science can focus, Bakhtin claims the system of language to be an artificial abstraction not directly linked to actual speech, and not independent from it. Thus Bakhtin's authorial voice penetrates the voice of mainstream linguistics with *hostile* intentions.

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<sup>32</sup> The only passage where something is proposed by way of argument is Бахтин (1996г: 308), where Bakhtin merely repeats a structuralist commonplace about the system of language making the difference between human speech and inarticulate grunts (and already in the same paragraph finds such an approach to language to be insufficient).

<sup>33</sup> Here's a sample in the sarcastic mode: "A combination of two ideas (or conversely, a dismemberment of a complex idea into two simple ones) occurs in the mind of the speaker, and he enunciates sentences such as the following: 'The sun is shining', 'Grass is green', 'I am sitting', etc. Such sentences are of course quite possible, but either they are justified by the context of the whole utterance, through which they partake in speech interaction ... or, if these are full utterances, they are somehow justified by the speech situation, connecting them to the chain of speech interaction" (Бахтин 1996г: 199).

<sup>34</sup> Or in the words of Stewart (1983: 266), "Bakhtin's meta-position [referring to metalinguistics] is not so much a move towards transcendence as it is a battle stance".

## 5. Conclusion

So, what is the solution to the puzzle of nobody's words? Bakhtin's position is complex, linked not only to the Bakhtin Circle linguistic works, but also to Bakhtin's early ethical philosophy and the existentialist and personalist influences on it. But all this complexity notwithstanding, it seems to me that Bakhtin is firmly committed to the position that nobody's words exist only in the abstract world of theory, and not in language as we speak it. Neither have Bakhtin's own words been taken from the dictionary. Rather, in his writing he actively engages with the voices of others, revealing his authorial position no less in how he manipulates these voices than in what he says directly.

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