

In a 2012 essay exploring the sharp rise of research into conversation since 1990, Peter Burke wrote "Conversation is not so much a single speech genre as a cluster of genres with their own styles and conventions." Sixty years earlier Mikhail Bakhtin contended that "[t]he wealth and diversity of speech genres are boundless because the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible, and because each sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex. Special emphasis should be placed on the extreme heterogeneity of speech genres (oral and written)." Both these authors point out the complexity of the field. This they attribute to the intersection of breadth of genres clustered together under the concept of conversation, and the diverse range of disciplines that can be called upon to analyse conversation and its genres.

Bakhtin based his analysis of speech acts (as opposed to written language) around the idea of utterances as a unit of communication. Where written language is shaped by the grammatically complete sentence, spoken language is formed through the complete utterance – which may not be grammatically complete. We can stop in the middle of a sentence and never finish it, yet it will still be a complete utterance for the purpose of the conversation, and other speakers can respond because "[t]he boundaries of each concrete utterance as a unit of speech communication are determined by a change of speaking subjects." The form of our utterances in any given circumstance is a combination of thematic content, linguistic style, and compositional structure. Each of these aspects are dynamic, changing with context, and evolving over time through shifts in commonly held forms. However most situations have a stable form, or convention, that is shared amongst the participants. It is these stable forms that Bakhtin identified as speech genres.

Each of us possesses competency in multiple speech genres, but our knowledge of them is not conscious. "Our repertoire of oral (and written) speech genres is rich. We use them confidently and skillfully *in practice*, and it is quite possible for us not to suspect their existence *in theory*." If we sidestep to Pierre Bourdieu for a moment, the unconscious repertoire of genres we have access to are informed by a complex interplay of influences from our class, education, work and life experience to our embeddedness in different cultural contexts and our gender.

Bakhtin's theory of the utterance is also a theory of responsivity, of the handing back and forth of speech, and the active role of the speech partner, not solely as a listener, but as someone who takes a responsive attitude to an utterance from the first word that is said, agreeing or disagreeing (in whole or part), arguing with the substance of the utterance, or applying or acting in response to it. This response is not necessarily immediate, or verbal, but Bakhtin argues that "sooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behaviour of the listener." Through out this it is the utterance, rather than the words or sentence structure that creates the conditions for response, and it is the conditions for response that structure the interaction. Beyond the immediate context of the current utterance, no single utterance exists in isolation: "Any concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication of a particular sphere. The very boundaries of the utterance is determined by a change of speech subjects. Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self sufficient; they are aware and mutually reflect one another. ... Each utterance must be regarded primarily as a *response* to preceding utterances of the given sphere." It follows then that utterances in the chain of response need not be proximate in time or space, rather simply responsive to another utterance, no matter how delayed that response is.

Two more components make up Bakhtin's extended argument about why spoken language is not equivalent to the individual and combined meanings of the words spoken. The first is the expressive nature of speech acts. The speaker's emotional evaluation of the subject they speak on shapes the form the utterance and is conveyed through the expressive tonality of the delivery. Words alone, Bakhtin argues are neutral, even if they designate emotions and evaluations their utterance can run counter to the word's meaning. The second component is the quality of

addressivity of an utterance – by whom an utterance is spoken and to whom it is addressed, from the informal dialogue partner to a more or less differentiated public or an indefinite other, and for Bakhtin, “unless one accounts for the speaker’s attitude toward the *other* and his utterances (existing or anticipated), one can understand neither the genre nor the style of speech.”

These ideas – that: it is the utterance, not the sentence that is the unit of communication; we as speakers possess and use multiple genres; an utterance is part of an ongoing chain of utterances and is framed by the condition of responsivity; it is expressive of emotional evaluation; and that an utterance is shaped by the quality of being directed toward a recipient – are useful frames for thinking about how to both work with and analyse conversation in art consciously.

Conversation as a material or performance of art has a (greater or lesser) degree of improvisation, operating in the intersection of the (more or less) designed situation and the destabilising participation of the other conversationalists as the work unfolds. However, the designed situation does influence the conscious and unconscious choices people make in approaching and participating in the conversation as artwork. And while the artist may consciously make choices around the structuring the invitation to participate, topic choice, introductory statements, physical environment, participatory actions etc., there is another set of more unconscious decisions that are being made around these parameters of speech genre, responsivity, emotional tone, and addressivity that also shape the artwork. As Bakhtin conclude in his essay “[a]ll these phenomena are connected with the whole of the utterance, and when this whole escapes the field of vision of the analyst they cease to exist for him.”

References:

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