
DISCOURSE IN THE NOVEL – AN ESSAY BY M.M. BAKHTIN

SHWETA SHARMA

Abstract: For the present paper, the essay “Discourse in the Novel” by M.M. Bakhtin has been reviewed and an attempt has been made to develop understanding of discourse on the basis of Bakhtin’s account. Since it has been argued that language mediates mental functioning, the paper attempted to look at the ways in which discourses help in constituting the mind functioning taking Bakhtin’s idea of discourse.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Discourse, Language, Mental functioning.

Introduction: For the present paper, the essay “Discourse in the Novel” by M.M. Bakhtin has been reviewed and an attempt has been made to develop understanding of discourse on the basis of Bakhtin’s account. Since it has been argued that language mediates mental functioning, the paper attempted to look at the ways in which discourses help in constituting the mind functioning taking Bakhtin’s idea of discourse. In the first part of the paper, nature of discourse has been discussed. The paper will discuss the assumptions about the discourses on which basis he challenges the notion of monologic utterance. And propose that it is the dialogic orientation in discourses which makes it artistically rich. According to Bakhtin, dialogic relationship enters at three levels (i) between word and its object (ii) between word and the speaking subject (iii) when a word enters into elastic environment of alien words about the same object or theme. All these kinds of dialogic processes taking place simultaneously shape discourses, complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile. In the second part of paper, the paper has discussed the ways in which Bakhtin’s ideas of dialogicality can help us to understand the role of language in mediating mental functioning.

About the Author: Mikhail M. Bakhtin

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was Russian philosopher, born in November 17, 1895, who worked on literary theories, ethics and philosophy of language. His writings inspired scholars from diverse disciplines like literary criticism, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and psychology. In 1929, Bakhtin’s first major work, “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art”, was published. It is here that Bakhtin introduces the concept of dialogism. However, just as this book was introduced, Bakhtin was accused of participating in the Russian Orthodox Church’s underground movement. The truthfulness of this charge is not known, even today. Consequently, Bakhtin was to six years of internal exile in Kazakhstan. Bakhtin spent these six years working as a book-keeper in the town of Kustanai, during which time he wrote several important essays, including “Discourse in the Novel”^[1]. In this essay, he talked about nature of

discourse. Moreover, he challenged the notion of monologic utterance. Rather he proposed in favour of dialogic orientation in discourses which makes it artistically rich.

Bakhtin on Discourse: In this essay “Discourse in the novel”, argues that discourses of all kind whether verbal or written are dialogical in nature. Moreover, this dialogic character provides discourses, particularly in novels, an artistic character. As he writes: “The dialogic orientation of a word among other words (of all kinds and degrees of otherness) creates new and significant artistic potentials in discourses, creates a potential for a distinctive art of prose, which has found its fullest and deepest expression in the novel” (1981: 275).

Bakhtin argues that traditionalist and stylistics failed to recognize that language does not operate in absence of socio-political and cultural forces. Rather there are two kinds of forces – centripetal and centrifugal forces of languages that works simultaneously. While centripetal forces are embodied in “unitary language” that constitutes the theoretical expression of historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, centrifugal forces insures the dynamism of language and provides the quality of being stratified and heteroglossia in nature. It is this interplay of forces that provide every utterance a different meaning in discourse thus makes it artistically rich. These centripetal and centrifugal forces can be understood in terms of phenomenon of reification and participation that Wenger (1998) has talked about. Wenger argues that “in process of reification, a certain understanding is given form. This form then becomes a focus for the negotiation of meaning”. Therefore, it can be inferred that like reification, centripetal forces of language works in similar fashion, and attributes a particular understanding as a meaning of the utterance. Moreover, the process of participation also helps in maintaining the dynamism of language by continuously bringing in the newly negotiated meanings of utterances. In addition to this Wenger too emphasis on the social character of participation as it involves both action and

connection. As he says: participation refers to the process of taking part and also to the relations with others that reflects this process (1998:55).

Therefore, one can be convinced that, as Bakhtin (1981: 272) argues,

“The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accentuated as an individual utterance”

The above statements talk about various characteristics of discourses that need explanation in order to understand how discourse analysis can help us in psychological inquiries. The most important above all is the “dialogic orientation of discourse”. Bakhtin argued that

“There lies specific phenomenon that are present in the discourse and that are determined by its dialogic orientation, first, amid other’s utterances inside a single language (the primordial dialogism of discourse), amid other “social languages” within a single “national language” and finally amid different national languages within the same culture, that is, the same socio-ideological conceptual horizon” (1981: 275).

This makes clear that discourse is dialogic in three ways which are of different forms and degrees. According to Bakhtin, dialogic relationship enters at three levels (i) between word and its object (ii) between word and the speaking subject (iii) when a word enters into elastic environment of alien words about the same object or theme. All these kinds of dialogic processes taking place simultaneously shape discourses, complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile.

Bakhtin challenged the traditionalist and stylistics assumption of word acknowledging its object in unitary and singular way. According to Bakhtin, any utterance when it is directed towards its object, finds that the object has already been talked about in ‘alien’ words or the object is defined in features which are charged with value and thus in the field of contestation. Bakhtin writes (277):

“if we imagine the intention of such a word, that is, its directionality towards the object, in a form of the ray of light, then the living and the unrepeatable play of colors and lights on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word, not within the object itself, but rather as its spectral dispersion in an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgements, and accents through which the ray passes on its way towards the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle”.

This implies that one must acknowledge that the object has its own history of contradictory acts of verbal recognition and the heteroglossia. Heteroglossia simply refers to the diversity of social languages, socially defined discourse types in a community. Thus, according to Bakhtin, the word conceptualize object not in singular way but rather through multi-directional ways situated in tension filled interactive field. This account for the internal dialogism of word which is present in monologic utterance too (that have been ignored by the traditionalist and stylistics analysts).

However, dialogism between the word and object does not help in explaining the complete process of internal dialogism of word. The internal dialogism also includes the dialogic relationship between the word and the speaking individual. According to this, word is always in a living conversation; therefore, every word is orientated towards a future answer. Importantly, here, Bakhtin argues that any utterance or word is not neutral due to centripetal and centrifugal forces at work all the time. Rather, the meaning is continuously evolving in the backdrop of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments which are present to the speaker which does not reside in the object itself rather in the consciousness of the listener. Moreover, through this process, listener’s heteroglossia too enters in the speaker’s consciousness. This provides a ground for understanding for a speaker to count on. And thus speaker involves in a dialogic interaction with certain aspects of word and develops a readjusted understanding of the word. Wenger (1998: 54) too has talked about this process as a process of negotiation of meaning in his communities of practice theory. As he argued: “negotiating meanings entails both interpretation and action”. Moreover, Vygotsky has also argued that it is the sense of the word that matters rather than the literal meaning of it. As Vygotsky argued “the first is the primacy of the sense of a word over its meaning. Sense is the “sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word . . . a dynamic, fluid, complex whole” (pp. 244-245); meaning, in contrast, is generalized, abstract, and thus, ultimately, limited. In inner speech, therefore, what is primary is the sense of a word as it is used in a particular context, not its precise meaning as contained, for example, in a dictionary (as cited by Tappan 1987: 82).

The third dialogism is situated in elastic environment of alien words about the same object or theme where the word enters. This dialogism is evident in the above mentioned kind of dialogic relationships. Moreover, internal dialogism leads to reformulation of semantics and syntactical structures of discourses. Therefore, it is the internal dialogism present in the

novel that provides it artistic value. As he writes: “but internal dialogization can become such a crucial factor for creating form only where individual differences and contradictions are enriched by social heteroglossia, where dialogic reverberations do not sound in the semantic heights of discourse but penetrate the deep strata of discourse, dialogize language itself and the world view a particular language has (the internal form of discourse) where the dialogue of voices arises directly out of a social dialogue of “languages”, where an alien utterance begins to sound like socially alien language, where the orientation of a word among alien utterances changes into an orientation of a word among socially alien languages within the boundaries of one and the same national languages.” (pp. 276).

Role of understanding of discourse in psychology: It has been argued that analysis of discourse helps in two major ways. Firstly, it helps us in understanding the process through which the meaning is negotiated in local interactions in everyday contexts as in case of discursive psychology. Secondly, it helps us to explore the role of language in the constitution of social and psychological life (through Foucauldian discourse analysis). Though both these approaches try to answer different questions of psychology, but it must be noticed that the focus is on the role of language.

The most influential account of role of language in mediating human behavior and thinking has been given by Vygotsky. Based on Vygotsky’s cultural historical theory of development, Wertsch (1985, 1989) proposed “general genetic law of cultural development” that stated “any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an inter-psychological category, and then within the child as an intra-psychological category” (as cited by Tappan, 1997). In this process, culture employs different kinds of artifacts, tools and symbols that not only mediate all kinds of our mental functioning rather they transform the function itself. And language is the most important tool that first acts as a tool to communicate and then transform itself in order to mediate thinking. As Tappan (1997) mentions “for Vygotsky this transformation (language as communicating device to tool in its own right) is particularly salient in early childhood, when, with the advent of egocentric speech (as an intermediate step toward inner speech), language begins to be used as an “instrument of thought” in its own right, a “tool” that helps the child plan activities and solve problems”.

Now as the language becomes an instrument of thought, and helps us to master our behavior, words

gain their idiomatic quality embedded in their socio-political-cultural context. By idiomatic quality, Vygotsky implied that words acquire special meanings that now include connotations for number of thoughts and feelings. Moreover, it implies that these words now acquire meaning situated in cultural and historical discourse. And therefore, it is difficult to translate this meaning of word into communicative speech. A word gains idiomatic quality firstly because of peculiarities present in syntactical and syntactical structure of it in inner speech and secondly, because of the impact of the “historical-cultural process” on the development of “verbal thought” (as cited in Tappan 1997). As the syntax of inner speech becomes disconnected and incomplete while preserving their predicate that helps in prediction, semantics becomes crucial. The semantic peculiarities include

(i) the primacy of the sense of a word over its meaning. Sense is the “sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word . . . a dynamic, fluid, complex whole”; meaning, in contrast, is generalized, abstract, and thus, ultimately, limited. In inner speech, therefore, what is primary is the sense of a word as it is used in a particular context, not its precise meaning as contained, for example, in a dictionary. The second is the tendency, in inner speech, toward “agglutination” i.e. combining several words and/or phrases into one new word that “not only expresses a rather complex idea, but designates all the separate elements contained in that idea”. The third represents the “influx of sense” which implies that the senses of different words flow into and influence one another, such that, ultimately, “a single word is so saturated with sense that . . . it becomes a concentrate of sense. To unfold it into overt speech, one would need a multitude of words” (as cited in Tappan 1997).

Now let us now shift our focus of understanding to the second aspect of inner speech i.e. impact of historical cultural process on the development of verbal thought. As we all know language is a cultural product, Vygotsky (as cited by Tappan 1997), therefore, socio-cultural processes are bound to enter the developmental picture. As Vygotsky writes “The child’s intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of thought, that is, language... If we compare the early development of speech and intellect—which, as we have seen, develop along separate lines both in animals and in very young children—with the development of inner speech and verbal thought, we must conclude that the latter stage is not a simple continuation of the earlier. The nature of the development itself changes, from biological to socio-historical. Verbal thought is not an innate, natural form of behavior, but is

determined by a historical cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in the natural forms of thought and speech. Once we acknowledge the historical character of verbal thought, we must consider it subject to all of the premises . . . which are valid for any historical phenomenon in human society. (pp. 94-95). (As mentioned by Tappan,1997).

In this account given by Vygotsky, one can see that the dialogical nature of discourse is quite evident. It argues that as the speech moves from inter-psychological plane i.e. external in nature to intra-psychological plane, the dialogical nature of speech is not lost. It is clear that meaning is central to cultural historical approach to development as notion of mediation is central. And according to Bakhtin, meaning is situated in a dialogical relationship working at three levels simultaneously (described earlier). Therefore, the process and structures of semiotic mediation provide a crucial link between historical, cultural and institutional contexts on the one hand and mental functioning of the individual on the other (Wertsch, 2001). Therefore according to Vygotsky 1997), 'the mental nature of man represents the totality of social relations internalized and made into functions of the individual' (Silvonen,). E.g. in case of moral judgment, dialogical account of discourse at the level of inner speech is evident. When a person (child, adolescent, or adult) is faced with a moral problem, conflict, or dilemma, he/she

responds to it by means of inner speech which involves dialogue between two voices- one voice that states the action as correct/ right and other voice against the action to be judged. The inner dialogue is not free of its socio-cultural context. Thus, it is set in context of heteroglossia speech, where any word or utterance is filled with various viewpoints and thus is not free from contestations. Moreover, it is of no surprise that this inner dialogue is bound to have those peculiar syntactic and semantic characteristics of inner speech as discussed by Vygotsky.

Conclusion: Bakhtin's account of dialogicality in discourses provides essential insights for understanding of psychological mental functioning.

His approach suggests that what comes to be incorporated into, or presupposed by, an utterances are voices that were formerly represented explicitly in intermental functioning. This is how one voice comes into contact with another, thereby changing the meaning of what it is saying by becoming increasingly dialogical (Wertsch, 2001). Moreover, the account of how meaning is constituted through dialogic interaction helps us to see that the self can never be a disengaged image. In order to attribute meaning to any utterance, social construction within cultural realm is obligatory. Thus, Bakhtin, like Vygotsky helps us to see that dialogism in our interactions, discourses mediate our mental functioning by helping us to make meaning of our experience.

References:

1. Bakhtin M.M (1981); "Discourse in the Novel": The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays; University of Texas Press, Austin; pp. 259-422.
2. Wertsch J (2001); "The Multivoicedness of Meaning": Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader; Sage Publications Ltd.
3. Wenger E. (1998); "Meaning": Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity; Cambridge University Press.
4. Tappan M. (1997); "Language, Culture, and Moral Development: A Vygotskian Perspective; Developmental Review, Vol. 17, pp. 78-100.
5. Silvonen J (2005); "Vygotsky's plural discourse on the human mind". ISCAR congress in Seville. OnlineSource:http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Bakhtin
6. The essay is a part of Bakhtin's Book : The Dialogic Imagination published in 1981.

Shweta Sharma/Research Scholar/
Jawaharlal Nehru University/shwetao608@gmail.com