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Heteroglossia

Heteroglossia means the simultaneous use of different kinds of speech or other signs, the tension between them, and their conflicting relationship within one text. The term was coined (from the Greek stems meaning "other" and "speech": ἑτερο—+γλοσσ—+ια by Mikhail Bakhtin in his theoretical work on the novel in the period from 1934 to 1935, and has become extraordinarily popular in literary and anthropological works since the 1980s. Bakhtin had in mind both the stylistic and social differences within the language of any modern developed society, as well as the intention of writers to recreate them in prose, particularly in the novel, a medium that could operate with different artistic images of languages and styles (Joyce's *Ulysses*, each chapter of which was written in a different linguistic style, serves as an example). Heteroglossia is opposed to monoglossia (the dominance of one language), typical of an ancient city such as Athens, and to polyglossia (the coexistence of two languages, for instance of English and French in medieval England). The spoken language of a modern society may seem to be more or less unified, but there are not only different social dialects (such as the variations of New York English studied in modern sociolinguistics), but also individual differences among speakers. This peculiarity is reflected in the way a writer of novels characterizes each of their heroes. In a novel a main hero usually speaks in a way that is differentiated from the other characters. Each of the heroes may have his or her own stylistic sphere. A representative case of heteroglossia is found in the ironic use of speech forms, particularly in parody. In several places in *Ulysses*, Joyce suggests a parody of the new Irish drama: "It's what I am telling you, mister honey, it's queer and sick we were, Haines and myself, the time himself brought it in. . . ." In the chapter "Nausicaa," a woman's magazine style takes over; in the chapter "Eumaeus," a parody of provincial journalese is introduced. In other parts of the novel there is a grotesque mixture of several styles, as in a mockery of learned English in the speech of the ghost of Bloom's grandfather.

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Conflicting tendencies are hidden in the semantic potential of almost every word and they may be realized in everyday speech. But particularly pronounced features occur in the social contexts that make their ambivalence relevant for the whole society. This aspect of language in a totalitarian society was depicted in the image of Orwell's Newspeak. In a single utterance different speech attitudes may appear simultaneously. It was said that the Soviet Communist party leader Leonid Brezhnev used to say to his family at night: "It's time for me to go read Marx." Without knowledge of the real context, a stranger might have heard in this sentence the genuine intention of a Marxist official to reread in his spare time the works of the founder of the movement (comparable, perhaps, to a rereading of the Bible by a priest). But what Brezhnev actually intended was his cynical hatred for this old-fashioned duty that had become a senseless ritual. To him Marx's works were terribly dull and could cause one to become drowsy. Thus what he really meant was his desire to go to bed. Even if this joke were not real and belonged to the realm of Soviet folklore of the period, it was quite symbolic because it showed the complete deterioration of the former communist creed, in which Marx had acquired the role of substitute apostle. A similar problem, but in connection to a real religion (and not its fake substitute, to which Soviet ideology deteriorated), has been discussed by Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais and the folk culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In this work finished by 1945, Bakhtin (as Jacques Le Goff would do later) has discovered semiotic heteroglossia characteristic of the medieval European culture. It was characterized by the potential use of signs and words pertaining to the sphere of the official Church culture and of those which belonged to unofficial folklore. The latter used parody of the official language as well as another set of symbols pertaining to the carnival tradition. As rites involving the inversion of official symbols seem to be universal (according to the anthropological works of Edmund Leach and Victor Turner), semiotic heteroglossia utilizing grotesque carnival images may belong to the most important features of almost all known societies. In this particular case, heteroglossia may be seen at the purely linguistic level as well as on a higher level of signs encoded with verbal expressions. Thus in a medieval Old Czech mystery studied from a similar point of view by Roman Jakobson, Latin songs coexist with grotesque jokes in Old Czech. Heteroglossia (very often called by different terms having the same meaning), as a parallel or simultaneous use of different signs and images belonging to partly opposed or conflicting spheres, may be a feature common to all cultures.

(See also *competence, crossing, humor, ideology, indexicality, poetry, style, syncretism, theater, translation, voice*)

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