

Influence of Saussure's Linguistics on Bakhtin's Philosophy

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Abstract: This article examines the intricate relationship between Mikhail Bakhtin's literary and cultural philosophy and the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. The paper explores how Bakhtin's metalinguistics and dialogue principle were influenced by and diverged from Saussure's theoretical constructs, particularly the dichotomies of "langue" and "parole." Bakhtin's critical inheritance of Saussure is evident in his emphasis on the utterance and the text, moving beyond Saussure's systemic approach to embrace a more fluid, contextually rich understanding of language. His dialogism proposes an active role for speakers in the ongoing cultural dialogue, thereby redefining the relationship between language, literature, and social reality.

Keywords: Bakhtin; Saussure; Linguistic; Dialogism

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1. Introduction

Critical attention to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin is, by any standard, extraordinarily intensive^[1]. In theoretical research, some scholars find the relevance of Bakhtin's theories for other theories. Eigler submitted that Bakhtin's socio-linguistic approach to literature can be most productive in making the difficult transition from feminist theory to the analysis of individual texts^[2]. Some Western scholars conducted a comparative analysis of a set of statements by Bakhtin and Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Levinas, etc. French scholar Kristeva examines Bakhtin's ideas in the context of poststructuralist principles. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) is one of the greatest linguists of the 20th century. His *Course in General Linguistics*, published in Paris in 1916, is the representative work of his structuralist linguistics. In contrast, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975), one of the most famous thinkers of the 20th century, was not widely known until the 1960s for his remarkable achievements in philosophy, literature, and aesthetics. Some scholars, particularly in China, make a contrast between Bakhtin and Saussure in terms of their views of language. Among them, opinions on Bakhtin's inheritance and criticism of Saussure's theories are in opposite directions. From the point of view of strategy, according to Li, Bakhtin inherited Saussure critically,

while others inherently criticized Saussure^[3]. Nonetheless, a basic consensus has been reached, namely, Saussurean linguistics has a profound influence on Bakhtin's view of language, literature, and art. Bakhtin studied Saussure's linguistics and found that his theory only partially covered his view of language. On this basis, Bakhtin put forward his metalinguistics and formed and developed his dialogue principle. Bakhtin's dialogism is one of the cores of his studies and thoughts throughout his life and greatly influences the formation of his art and culture philosophy.

2. Under the influence of Saussure's linguistics: Bakhtin's metalinguistics

The successful publication of the *Course of General Linguistics* brought a great change in the trend of language research. Saussure, influenced by Descartes' dualism, resignified the research scope, method, object, and content of linguistics, subverting traditional linguistics and forming the new framework of linguistic studies. Specifically, Saussure divided linguistics into internal linguistics and external linguistics. Saussure's definition of language presupposes the exclusion of everything that is outside its organism or system, namely, of everything known as "external linguistics," although external linguistics deals with many important things such as the very ones that we think of when beginning the study of speech^[4]. In terms of research method, internal linguistics, with Saussure's almost all attention, is divided into synchronic linguistics and diachronic linguistics. In the *Course of General Linguistics*, Saussure used a completely new method against the New Grammar School. It was Saussure who changed the direction of language research from historically comparative linguistics in the 19th century to descriptive linguistics in the 20th century. Questioning the original research method, Saussure argued that linguistics must be carefully distinguished from ethnography and prehistory, where language is used mainly to document. Besides, it must also be set apart from anthropology, which studies man solely from the viewpoint of his species. Furthermore, the theory of linguistic structural system proposed by Saussure makes it clear that the real research object of linguistics is the most important task of this discipline. In light of this, Saussure defines and makes a distinction between language and speech. According to Saussure, speaking is something that can be studied. Although dead languages are no longer spoken, researchers can easily assimilate their linguistic organisms. Whereas speech is heterogeneous and social. It is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound images, and in which both parts of the sign are psychological (Saussure 15). Saussure identified language as the real and only object of study and believed that linguistic research is relatively closed, standardized, and systematic. A Chinese scholar once illustrated Saussure's framework of linguistic studies (**Figure 1**)^[5].

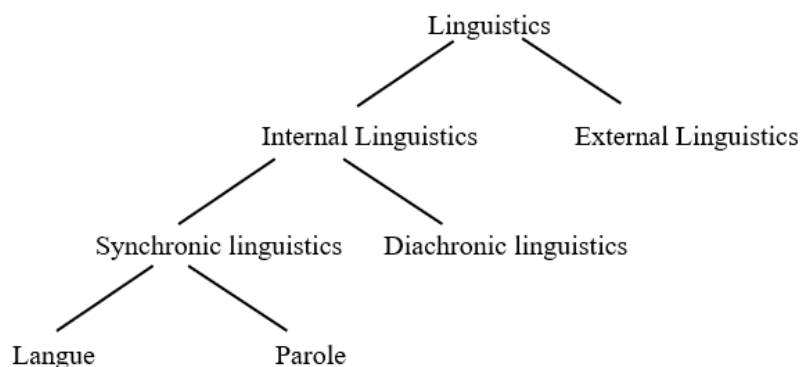


Figure 1. Saussure's framework of linguistic studies

The unspoken premise of Bakhtin's discussion about language is Saussure's dichotomous and dialectical framework of linguistics studies. In terms of the research scope of linguistics, Bakhtin, in turn, believed that internal linguistics is only a way to discuss the abstract system of language and is not practical. He maintained that this kind of analytical thinking can only be used to translate or describe dead languages ^[6]. Unlike Saussure, his successor believed that abstract internal linguistics can also be scientific, but certain defects in discussing the abstract living language in daily life do exist. In the aspect of the research method of linguistics, Bakhtin, however, preferred an objective point of view and even believed that synchronicity does not match all objective factors. Bakhtin believed that speech activities should be used as the entrance to explain language rules, and specific verbal communication exists in every field of social life. Bakhtin emphasizes that the study object of linguistics should be discourse or language in use in life. Bakhtin holds that language embodies the sum of the contradictions of consciousness of different social groups in different periods. Any language needs to be inherited and integrated, and no language can be completely free from the influence of time, space, and human activities, so the study of language should adhere to the dynamic diachronic research method. Bakhtin's criticism of Saussurean linguistics in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* can be summed up as follows: langue always precedes parole, isolating speakers from the language system. Speakers, consequently, are not only denied a role in the language system. They are also denied their role as social agents (which destroys the concept of society). *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* argues that language is a creative-communicative action (and not a system of "laws," as in Saussure), which is shared by individuals who, together, act in and upon society. Therefore, they are neither passive recipients of a pre-given "society," nor self-contained individuals pitted against. In his *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*, he also said that the real presentation of language should be discourse. Discourse is a socially binding activity with sociality. According to Bakhtin, the definition of language as a kind of discourse is actually different from language as a system, but it cannot be completely distinguishable from the language system. Bakhtin coined the term in his theoretical work on the novel in 1934–1935—heteroglossia referring to "the simultaneous use of different kinds of speech (or other signs), the tension between them and their conflicting relationship inside one text." Bakhtin attacks the combination of structuralist abstraction and individualist subjectivism characteristic of formal linguistics and constructs an alternative conception of discourse. Although Bakhtin followed the framework of linguistic research proposed by Saussure, he found that Saussure's view of language was not enough to cover his own views on language after his study of Saussure's linguistics. As a result, in the second edition of his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin coined a linguistic term—metalinguistics and developed it in several of his school papers as a framework for the analysis of language and discourse. Later, Roland Barthes called it translinguistics, examining discourse as a field much broader than a sentence and turning popular among scholars ^[7]. Bakhtin opposed all the main positions of Saussure's theory (Stewart) and put forward his metalinguistics as a supplement to Saussure's pure linguistics. His metalinguistics framework can be seen in **Figure 2**.

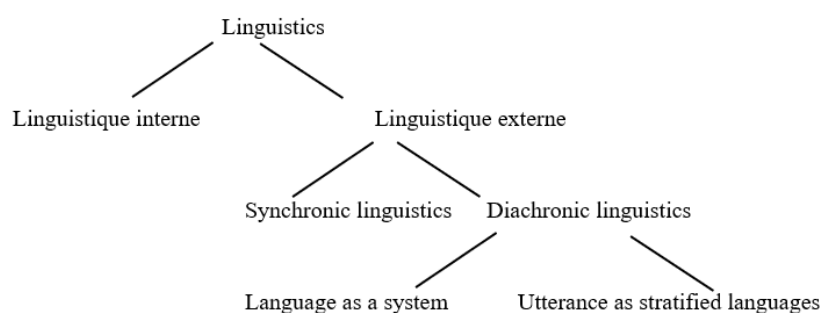


Figure 2. Bakhtin's metalinguistics framework

Bakhtin evokes the paradigmatic series as Saussure's model for the internal structure of language, a model which he criticizes at great length, to find his own dialogic. Saussure himself also noted the inadequacies of his theories and proposed "linguistics of parole" in his *Course in General Linguistics*, with speech as its object was also this part of Saussure's research program, and the later scholar Bakhtin completed the unfinished part. According to Ivanov, the distinction between langue by Saussure and text by his Russian successor lies in the difference between a macro-world of a language system and a micro-world of an utterance that should be united. Some scholars even found an attempt to break the conceptual boundaries of Saussure's system and Bakhtin's text or discourse in the writings of the Tartu-Moscow School.

Bakhtin repudiated theories of Saussure's linguistics, which only studied language as a system, but he did not go from one extreme to the other. Although in the semantics tradition of Russia at that time and linguistics of text became an established field in the Russian science of language, Bakhtin firmly denied that he was purely semantic. He reminded people that beyond linguistic forms, there exist forms that combine these forms. One of many definitions of dialogism offered in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* shows that two discourses equally and directly oriented towards a referential object within the limits of a single context cannot exist side by side without intersecting dialogically.

3. Omnipresent dialogism: Bakhtin's philosophic view of literature

Bakhtin was by no means just a professional linguist. The language was an important part of his thinking about the humanities, verbal art, and particularly, the novel. His ideas had much in common with those of other great thinkers of the century, such as Wittgenstein, Russell, Bohr, Florensky, and Spet, whose philosophy had a characteristic "linguistic turn."

In Bakhtin's view, at any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word, but into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, "professional" and "generic" languages, languages of generations, and so forth. From this point of view, literary language is itself only one of these heteroglot languages—and it in its turn is stratified into languages (generic, period-bound, and others). And this stratification and heteroglossia, one realized, is not only a static invariant of linguistic life but also what ensures its dynamics: stratification and heteroglossia widen and deepen as long as the language is alive and developing. Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward.

To a great degree, Bakhtin's remarkable popularity can be ascribed to a more general condition, namely, the rapidly increasing concern with literary theory. Ponzio believes that philosophy for Bakhtin is a study of the points of contact and interaction among different disciplines and, as such, cannot be described as linguistic, philological, literary, sociological, or semiotic, and so forth^[8]. From a declaration by Mikhail Bakhtin in his 1973 conversations concerning the relation in his work between philology and philosophy with Viktor Duvakin, he is a philosopher more than a philologist. He looked at his material not as a philologist but as a philosopher. Bakhtin transferred his conceptions and principles in linguistics to his literary philosophy.

For literature genres, what appealed most to Bakhtin was tragic chaos above (in Dostoevsky) and comic chaos below (in Rabelais); in the spirit of the Romantics, he rejected the entire regulated sphere in between^[9]. For literary works, the less they resembled well-known and generally accepted literature, the more attractive it was to

him. And for him, the works themselves are less important than their coming into being. For literary characters, Bakhtin admired those heroes unfinished in novels, just as he criticized in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

Dostoevsky's "polyphonic novel" describes the character no longer as an "I," as an object, but as a center that is "other" and the perspective according to which his world is organized: Dostoevsky carried out, as it were, a small-scale Copernican revolution when he took what had been a firm and finalizing authorial definition and turned it into an aspect of the hero's self-definition.

Bakhtin's theory of speech genres is appropriated by the novel. Speech genres include professional jargon (the language of doctors, lawyers, teachers, politicians, priests, for example) and more everyday occurrences (letters, diaries, travel accounts, itineraries, shopping and other lists, songs, diatribes, lovers' small talk, and the miscellany of newspapers). They are not used exclusively in the novel by characters and narrators, and by the author, or posited author, whose voice is heard, so to speak, between the lines, when it does not intercede as such in the narrative. They are all-pervasive, as audible in expository or descriptive passages, which do not come intentionally from the mouths of designated characters and narrators (or the author or posited author), as in dramatized events, in which characters and narrators may be implicated, but which are not directly constructed out of the evaluative tones—the particular points of view—indicative of designated characters and narrators (or the author or posited author). Because speech genres are the very stuff of language, glossing Bakhtin, they cannot avoid being the essential structuring force of the novel. Consequently, the form of any novel is determined by the various speech genres that are written into it.

4. Art to culture: Bakhtin's philosophical view of culture

At that time, the social situation dominated by authoritarian ideology greatly compressed Bakhtin's discourse space, which prompted him to look for more speech space for individuals. Bakhtin lived in an era full of complexity and autocratic ideology. This, to some extent, gave birth to formalist aesthetics in which critics do not focus too much on the content and ideology of the text but on the structure. Bakhtin was then a kind of marginal figure and was once arrested for discussing theological issues. As a result, he tried to avoid making any comment on political events such as the October Revolution. Against this background, he finally found a rational proposition: speech. In communication with his close friends, he always practiced his "conversational nature." In his view, truth comes from circular dialogue, and there is no ultimate truth. The same is true in life. He lived a sober life, far from the world. In Todorov's view, this is due to two reasons: physical disability (osteomyelitis) and social sickness, Stalinism. In fact, no one can escape the influence of political systems and social structures on their people, especially intellectuals. Expression is something a theorist must avoid.

Language with strict rules only dwells in the home of collective consciousness, and individual consciousness would be abandoned when detected. What would happen in individual consciousness? Hirschkop submits that just two kinds of fate are left: individual consciousness submits itself under collective consciousness or just differs from the collective one as it is, constituting its discourse as an accidental or contingent deviation from so-called standards. As Bakhtin correctly notes, this means the privileging of one actual consciousness and the effective marginalizing of all others in practice. The privileged consciousness is constituted as the language of truth and reason, and any variant discourse is explained by reference to some peculiar social or psychological characteristic of its speakers. The rise of "standard" forms of modern European languages is the most recent manifestation of this phenomenon. And what politically happened in Bakhtin himself is a case in point. In the context of Saussure,

to achieve ideal unity, the ultimate destination of differences is to be excluded or even eliminated. In the social-historical context, total harmony can only be achieved through a class struggle. First, one class eliminates another, and then there is total harmony. Bakhtin believes that the essence of a language sign lies in the agent and ideology behind each language sign, which challenges Saussure's theoretical authority to some extent. As Clark puts it, Bakhtin's metalinguistics "inverts the value of langue and parole." Bakhtin agrees with the theory proposed by Saussure that language is a symbol with its own characteristics. On this premise, he believes that language should be represented by the form of ideology, and ideology can be explained by language symbols, and symbols and ideology are interdependent. Bakhtin also inherited Marx's thoughts on the relationship between ideology, economic base, and superstructure, and believed that symbols are ideologies, and language symbols can express corresponding ideologies and truly reflect the real world.

5. Final considerations

The exploration of the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics on Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophical outlook reveals a complex interplay of inheritance and transformation. Bakhtin, while acknowledging the foundational work of Saussure, transcends the limitations of his predecessor's framework by advocating for a more dynamic and socially engaged understanding of language.

Bakhtin's metalinguistics emerges as a critical response to Saussure's structural linguistics, emphasizing the lived experience of language and the role of utterance and text in the construction of meaning. This move from a static to a more fluid conception of language allows Bakhtin to delve into the richness of human communication, highlighting the stratification of languages and the heteroglossic nature of discourse.

Moreover, Bakhtin's dialogism challenges the Saussurean view of language as a closed system, proposing instead a model where language is inherently social and dialogic. In this model, the speaker is not a passive recipient of linguistic structures but an active participant in the ongoing dialogue of culture and society. This perspective resonates with Bakhtin's philosophical view of literature and culture, where the novel is seen as a space for the interplay of diverse voices and ideologies.

The dialogic principle, central to Bakhtin's thought, underscores the perpetual interaction between individual consciousness and collective discourse. It is through this interaction that language evolves, reflecting and shaping the socio-ideological landscapes of human experience. Bakhtin's work thus invites us to consider language not as a fixed entity but as a living, breathing aspect of human culture that is in constant conversation with itself.

In conclusion, Bakhtin's critical engagement with Saussure's linguistics has led to a profound reconceptualization of language, literature, and culture. His ideas have paved the way for a more nuanced understanding of the role of language in human life, emphasizing the importance of dialogue, heteroglossia, and the agency of speakers in the creation of meaning. Bakhtin's legacy continues to inspire scholars across disciplines, offering a rich framework for analyzing the complexities of human communication and the construction of social reality.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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