

PROBLEMS OF SENSE, SIGNIFICANCE AND VALIDITY IN THE BAKHTIN CIRCLE

The highly influential work of the Bakhtin Circle is founded upon a philosophy of language derived from several different areas. These include the work of the Vossler School (Vossler, Spitzer) and the philosophers of language Anton Marty and Karl Bühler, who sought to develop the ideas of Franz Brentano on intentionality in a discursive direction.¹ However, the Circle sought to recast the linguistic distinction between sense and significance on the basis of the neo-Kantian paradigm of values and validity. Part of this enterprise was, however, presaged by a linguistically exacerbated philosophical confusion between the Kantian notion of objective validity (*objektive Gültigkeit*) and the neo-Kantian notion of a separate and underivable realm of validity (*Geltung*). This resulted in problems and ambiguities similar to those inherent to the phenomenological approach to meaning as developed by Husserl, who was himself caught between an anti-Kantian theory of intentionality derived from Brentano and a neo-Kantian validity-logic (*Geltungslogik*) (Schuhmann and Smith 1985). This question has gone unnoticed in recent years at least partly due to the rather inconsistent attempts to render key philosophical terms from Bakhtin's work in English and, prior to this, the ambiguities involved in Bakhtin's own rendering of specific terms from German idealist philosophy in Russian, an awareness of which emerged from my own attempts to work out the principles for a harmonised translation and critical edition of the work of the Bakhtin Circle.

I therefore ask the reader's indulgence with the trilingual nature of the problems to be discussed below on the basis that the ramifications of disentangling these issues are of considerable importance for understanding the work of this important group of intellectuals and recognising the problematic areas where their ideas need to be revised.

Sense and significance

Bakhtin and his group use two words for dimensions of meaning which correspond fairly accurately in English and German. The first is *smysl* (sense) which is connected to the word *mysl'* (thought). This is close to the German *Sinn* (sense) may be used as a synonym of *Geist* (mind/spirit), and, as in English, also means the bodily sense(s). In English 'sense' is also connected to the concept of mind, as can be seen from its antonym, 'nonsense'. The second term is *znachenie* which is connected to *znachitel'nyi* (large in significance, size or number; serious) and to *znak* (sign), and thus roughly equivalent to the English word significance. This is close to the German term *Bedeutung* which derives from the verb *bedeuten* (to mean/signify). This is also connected with the second meaning of significance in English and Russian (*das hat nichts zu bedeuten* - it is not significant - *eto nichego ne znachit*). In every-

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day parlance, both of each pair of terms are used for 'meaning', but since the time of Frege a clear distinction has been drawn between these two dimensions even if the way that distinction has been understood has varied. However, the phenomenological tradition which Bakhtin follows is rather more slippery on the distinction between sense and significance than Frege's admirably lucid distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, usually translated as sense and reference.

From his very early work Bakhtin treats sense in a way that is similar to Husserl's notion of 'ideal meanings' in his *Logical Investigations*: as timeless, immutable, universals that are devoid of causal relationships with other objects and which exist independently of their expression or apprehension. In the early fragment known as *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* (*K filosofii postupka*) Bakhtin presents sense as something 'eternal' (*vechnyi*) which strives for material embodiment, the aesthetic dimensions of which are outlined in parts of the essay 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' (1994 a: 55, 179—180, 193-194). A little later, in the Dostoevskii study, he makes it clear that each utterance is informed by something akin to Husserl's 'meaning-conferring act' characterised by intentionality. Here Bakhtin shares with Husserl (and, indeed, Frege) the notion that the sense (*Sinn*, *smysl*) corresponding to an intentional object becomes an object in its turn, it can be made the object of a judgement, a sense of the second level and so on (Fpillesdal 1982: 79). In the 1929 edition of the Dostoevskii book the Husserlian language is explicit:

The directly intentional word is directed at its object and is the last meaningful (*smyslivoi*) instance within the limits of the given context. The object (*ob'ektnoe*) word is also only directed at the object, but at the same time it is an object of an alien authorial intention. But this alien intention does not penetrate into the object word, it leaves it as a whole and, not changing its sense and tone, subordinates it to its task (1994b: 77).²

As we shall see, although overtly phenomenological language to some extent disappears from Bakhtin's later writings, recently published archival notes show that the same considerations continue to lurk backstage as it were.

The Bakhtin Circle's clearest definition of significance (*znachenie*) is presented by Valentin Voloshinov in the book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929). Significance is defined as a *linguistic* function, 'the expression of a relationship of a sign, one instance of actuality, toward another actuality that it stands in for, represents, depicts. Significance is a function of a sign, therefore it cannot present significance to itself (being pure relation, function) as existing outside a sign, as some particular, independent thing'. A little later on he notes that 'by significance ... we understand all those moments of the utterance which are repeatable and self-identical in all repetitions (1995: 241, 318). The first of these suggests a name/bearer relationship while the second would suggest that element of meaning which belongs to a linguistic unit (word, clause, sentence etc.) regardless of the specific utterance of which it is a part.

One of the clearest aspects of the circle's pronouncements on meaning is that the process of articulation is a simultaneity of sense and significance, a composite act: as Voloshinov puts it, 'where there is no sign, there is also no ideology' (1995: 221). However, utterance is still an act with mental and physical moments akin to that outlined by Husserl:

In speaking we are continuously performing an internal act of meaning which fuses with the words and, as it were, gives them life. The effect of thus giving

them life is that the words and the entire utterance as it were *embody* in themselves a meaning, and bear it embodied in them as their sense. (Quoted in Dummett, 1993: 45)

This view of meaning had been linked to von Humboldt's notions of inner and outer language form (via the work of Anton Marty) in the first two decades of the twentieth century by the leading Russian exponent of Husserl's philosophy in Russia, Gustav Shpet (1996: 118n), and which, it seems, notwithstanding several differences on details, was adopted by Bakhtin. Thus in archival notes as late as 1953 Bakhtin could argue that

The objectual-meaningful (*predmetno-smyslovoi*) moment [of the utterance] is not formed from the meanings (*znachenie*) that are the content of the meaningful (*znachashchii*) units of language - words and sentences. The relationship of the objectual (*predmetnyi*) meaning (*smysl*) to linguistic significance (*znachenie*) is very complex. It must not be likened to the relationship of children's blocks to the picture made from them. Each block here is, so to speak, a real part of the picture. Linguistic meanings (*znachenie*) are not at all such parts of the objectual-meaningful (*predmetno-smyslovoi*) whole of the utterance, and this whole is not at all a combination of these meanings (*znachenie*). What is important is the relatedness of these meanings (*znachenie*) to real actuality, their use in the goals of mastery (cognitive, artistic, active) by new moments of actuality. When speaking we do not combine prepared elements, but we *relate*, adapt them to actuality. <...> (1996: 281)

We are thus presented with an essentially meaningless outer form of language (*znachenie*) into which life and meaning is breathed by fusion with an inner form (*smysl*). It seems that significance is something that belongs to the sentence as a grammatical unit, while sense belongs to the utterance, bounded by the change of discursive subjects. The use of terminology in the writings of the circle is not entirely consistent, but what is consistent is the suggestion that a mysterious act of subjective spontaneity occurs in the mind of the 'author' of the utterance which is part of the composite process by which the inner form is, in the Husserlian sense noted above, *embodied* in the outer form. The difference is the *intersubjective* nature of the process as presented by the Bakhtin Circle which derives from the work of Max Scheler (Poole, 2000). Voloshinov puts this particularly clearly when he argues that '... it is not appropriate to say that significance belongs to the word as such. It essentially belongs to the word positioned between two speakers, that is it is realised only in the process of responsive, active understanding... significance is the effect of the interaction of speaker with listener on the material of a given sound complex'. Even clearer is the statement that the 'sense of a word is entirely defined by its context. In essence, there are as many meanings (*znachenie*) of a given word as there are contexts of usage'. It is worth noting that the 'context' referred to here is the both verbal and non-verbal situation within which the utterance is made rather than the Fregean view that the meaning of a word is dependent upon its place within a sentence. The subsequent account of the distinction between theme (the unitary sense of the utterance as a whole) and significance only serves to stress the way in which the Husserlian view has been mapped onto that of von Humboldt: 'theme is the *upper, real (realnyi) limit (predel) of linguistic validity (znachimost')*, in essence, only theme means

(*znachit*) something definite. Significance; is the *lower limit (predel)* of linguistic validity (*znachimost'*). Significance, in essence, means (*znachit*) nothing, but possesses only potentiality - the possibility of meaning (*znachenie*) within a concrete theme' (1995: 321, 294, 319-320).

Neo-Kantian foundations of subjectivity and objectivity

Bakhtin's group were not primarily phenomenologists, much as they made use of many observations from that particular philosophical tendency, they were much more caught between neo-Kantianism and *Lebensphilosophie*, though with a pronounced drift towards neo-Hegelianism in the 1930s and 1940s. One of the central notions that facilitated the Circle's particular negotiation of all these trends by means of the philosophy of language was a particular understanding of the neo-Kantian notion of validity. In order to examine this question we must first note that there are two words in German philosophical discourse of the period that came to be translated by a single term in both English and Russian: *Gültigkeit* and *Geltung*. *Objektive Gültigkeit* is a central notion employed by Kant. In investigating the conditions of possible experience, Kant argued that philosophy must not concern itself with the question of fact (*quid facti*) but the question of right (*quid juris*). It inquires into the *right* of a concept to exist. As he puts it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the task of philosophy is to explain 'how subjective conditions of thought can have objective validity (*objektive Gültigkeit*), that is, can furnish conditions of the possibility of all knowledge of objects' (B122). Kant thus argues that objective validity relates to the employment of concepts a priori to objects. It is restricted to the condition of the possibility of objects of experience, of appearances, and to the conditions of all knowledge of objects. As he argues in the *Prolegomena* (section 20) 'The given intuition must be subsumed under a concept, which determines the form of judging in general relatively to the intuition, connects its empirical consciousness in consciousness generally, and thereby procures universal validity for empirical judgments'.

Neo-Kantian teaching on the question of validity was, however, based on R. H. Lotze's assertion that the reality of validity (*Geltung*) is an ultimate, undeniable and separate sphere of life which he likened to Plato's Ideas. For Lotze, 'the validity of the a priori elements of thought is established independently of any reference to possible experience, to representation, to the being of either appearances or of things-in-themselves'. Unlike Kant's *Gültigkeit*, Lotze's *Geltung* pertains to propositions which can be 'affirmed or denied regardless whether we are in a position actually to perceive or experience the objects to which the contents of those propositions refer' (Rose, 1981: 6). I cite the following passages from Lotze's *Logik* (1874) at length as they may be regarded as the definitive statements on the question:

...we call a thing Actual [*wirklich*] which is, in contradistinction to another which is not; an event Actual which occurs or has occurred, in contradistinction to that which does not occur; a relation Actual which obtains, as opposed to one that does not obtain; lastly we call a proposition Actually true which holds [*gilt*] or is valid as opposed to one of which the validity [*Geltung*] is still doubtful. This use of language is intelligible; it shows that when we call anything Actual, we mean always to affirm it, though in different senses according to the different forms which it assumes, but one or other of which it must necessarily assume, and of which no one is reducible to or contained in the other. For we can never

get an Event out of simple Being, the Actuality which belongs to things, namely Being or Existence, never belongs to Events - they do not exist but occur; again a proposition neither exists like things nor occurs like events... in itself ...the reality of a proposition means that it holds or is valid and that its opposite does not hold.³

This concept of validity... at once excludes the substance of the valid assertion from the reality of the actual being and implies its independence of human thought. As little as we can say how it happens that anything *is* or *occurs*, so little can we explain how it comes about that a truth has validity; the latter conception has to be regarded as much as the former as ultimate and underivable, a conception of which everyone may know what he means by it, but which cannot be constructed out of any constituent elements which do not already contain it. (Lotze, 1888: 208-209)

As this suggests, unlike Kant's *Gültigkeit* Lotze's *Geltung* is independent of any potential application to the spatio-temporal world. Anticipating an idea to be developed by Paul Natorp in his *Platons Ideenlehre* (1902), Lotze argues that 'Plato has been misunderstood as ascribing to the Ideas "an existence [*Dasein*] separate from things". In fact, Plato intended to ascribe to them, in so far as they exist eternally and unchangingly, only validity and not being, but lacked the terminology to draw the distinction' (Dummett, 1991: 112).⁴ As Gillian Rose has shown, linked in this way to Platonic and Leibnizian metaphysics, Kant's critical method was transformed into a *Geltungslogik*, a logic of validity which transformed objectification into the correlate of pure logic and excluded all investigation into empirical reality. Bakhtin was particularly close to the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism (Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, Ernst Cassirer), whose *Geltungslogik* was distinguished from that of their Baden School counterparts (Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert) by giving validity primacy over values (*Werte*). Kant's a priori judgements were now treated as ontological principles the validity of which was no longer guaranteed by their empirical employment, but which were based on the 'factual validity' (*faktische Geltung*) of mathematical principles. This validity underlies judgements which for Cohen are always judgements of being. Being is posited by the basic form of thought: judgements. Indeed the logic of thinking is indistinguishable from the reality of being so that 'being is the being of thinking: and thinking is the thinking of being (as being as object by being as subject: *genitivus obiectivus* and *genitivus subjectivus*)' (9-10). Paul Natorp outlined the Marburg approach to experience in a valuable passage which sums up Cohen's highly questionable interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*:

... the first discoverer of the basic truths of geometry did not investigate what he saw in the figure or in the mere notion of it and from that learn what its qualities were; what he produced was what he himself had a priori thought and mentally represented in it; and in like manner in the exact knowledge of nature reason perceives only what it itself produces. 'It is not outside ... it is within you'; but even then not as something that lies there finished and has only to be exhibited: on the contrary, 'you are everlastingly producing it'. Such production of the object constitutes experience as it occurs in unbroken progress in genuine science, genuine human traffic, in all genuine culture. (Köhnke, 1991: 181)

Objectivisation now signifies the 'production' of the object according to the 'factual validity' of the mathematics that underlies each science. At one

point Cohen even argued that genuine actuality consists of science in ‘published books’, being the product of pure thought (Bakradze 1960: 251).

Validity, sense and significance

An understanding of this relationship between the categories of validity and the object which is not given but produced is essential if we are to accurately interpret Bakhtin’s remarks on the relationship between significance and sense, the utterance and the linguistic unit, word and object. Husserl’s second account of meaning, the *noema*, was itself a transformation of the Marburg *Geltungsphilosophie* of *producing* the object according to factual validity, the judgement of being, the being of thinking.⁵ When Bakhtin in the passage quoted above speaks of the ‘objectual-meaningful (*предметно-смысловой*) moment’ of the utterance he is speaking about the cognitive act of producing the object which is identical with the ‘sense’ of the utterance. The other ‘moment’ is the ‘linguistic’ moment that is essentially meaningless for without the cognitive act it relates to no object, indeed it cannot do so for the object as such does not yet exist. A sentence becomes an utterance when it is related to ‘real actuality’ through which the sense-object is brought into being, but given the Marburg school’s teachings outlined above, we can see that the ‘actuality’, to which a linguistic unit is to be related in the construction of the utterance is synonymous with the assumed ‘factual validity’ of every science:

The speaker does not communicate anything for the sake of communicating, but has to do so from the objective validity (*объективная значимость*) of what is communicated (its truthfulness (*истинность*), beauty, veracity (*правдивость*) necessity, expressiveness, sincerity). Intercourse requires objective validity (*значимость*) (in all its various forms depending on the sphere of intercourse), without it intercourse would degenerate and decay. All utterances in one form or another have dealings with objective actuality regardless of the consciousness or will of people (speakers, those engaged in intercourse), and regardless of intercourse itself. (1996: 251)⁶

The ‘sphere of intercourse’ here which determines the specific form of ‘objective validity’ required relates to the domains of each individual science.

There is, however, a linguistic dimension of the problem that pertains to the tradition of translating German philosophical texts into Russian. The convention of translating Kant’s *Gültigkeit* as *znachimost’* in Russian seems to have been established at the end of the nineteenth century by Vladimir Solov’ev. Note, for example his translation of Kant’s *Prolegomena* #18, ‘Empirical judgments, so far as they have objective validity (*znachimost’*), are judgments of experience; but those which are only subjectively valid (*imeiut lich’ sub’ektivnuiu znachimost’*), I name mere judgments of perception’ (Kant, 1994: 55).⁷ However, at the time of the first translations of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* into Russian (1909), the term *Geltung* was still not firmly translated as *znachimost’*, being variously rendered as ‘*obiazatel’nost’* (obligatoriness), *deistvitel’nost’* (actuality), *znachenie* (significance) and *istinmost’* (truth). Two early reviewers, Sergei Gessen and Lev Salagov recommended adopting the term *znachimost’* as the alternatives failed to convey the full sense of the term *Geltung* and that since the very different term *Bedeutung* was also translated as *znachenie* confusion was inevitable (Chubarov, 1998: 187-190, 197-210). However, the rendering of both

Geltung and *Gültigkeit* as *znachimost'* was also not without problems since that term has an older, more everyday use which is related to the term *znachenie*. *Znachimost'* in this sense suggests a) importance (*vazhnost'*) or significance (*znachitel'nost'*) and b) sense (*smysl*), content (*soderzhanie*), significance/meaning (*znachenie*). The adjective which derives from this noun is *znachimyi*, which in its everyday meaning can mean a) to have significance/meaning (*znachenie*), weight (*ves*), value (*tennosf*), importance (*vazhnost'*) and (b) to be possessed by meaning (*znachenie*), sense (*smysl*).

This tangled web of terminology undoubtedly contributes to the problems encountered when decyphering Bakhtin's reflections of meaning. The Marburg School's wilful projection of Lotze's *Geltung* back onto Kant's *Gültigkeit* was now attached to the question of signification with the effect that each utterance relates to the 'objective validity' of scientific domains embodied in Cohen's 'published books', while rendering a sense (*smysl*) in linguistic terms (*znachenie*) makes that sense actual/valid (*znachimyi*). This is spelled out in Bakhtin's *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*.

But is not a sense (*smysl*) eternal, whereas the actuality of a consciousness and the actuality of a book transitory? But the eternity of sense, apart from its realisation, is potential non-axiological eternity, it is not valid (*znachimyi*). If, after all, this eternity-in itself <?> of sense was actually axiological-valid (*tseinnostno-znachimyi*) then the act of its embodiment, its thinking, its actual realisation by participative thinking would be superfluous and unnecessary, only in correlation with it does the eternity of a sense actually become valued-valid. It is only in correlation with actuality that an eternal sense becomes the compelling value of participative thinking, as a moment of it: the axiological eternity of this thought, this book. (1994 a: 55)

Here we can see that the 'actualisation' (in the sense of *Gültigkeit*) and thereby validation (In the sense of *Geltung*) of sense by means of significance is what concerns the early Bakhtin, and as the philosophy of language begins to be addressed in a more systematic way by his group this concern is transformed into an analysis of the relation between utterance and language.

Life, language and validity

One of the striking features of Bakhtin's early work is the way the neo-Kantian preoccupation with mathematics is subordinated to themes that are rather more typical of *Lebensphilosophie* (Tihanov, 2000). The above passage is no exception, what is theoretically valid needs to be realised in *life*, in 'this thought, this book', it needs to be embodied in the unrepeatable moment by the unique 'I' who has no 'alibi-in-being'. Abstract thought needs to become 'participative thinking', thinking in life. This is something that underlies Bakhtin's whole ethical philosophy: the individual subject is the seat of moral activity and is responsible in both the sense of being obliged to relate to the independent realm of logical validity that constitutes an 'Ought' and to respond to the incarnation of sense in the utterances of others. The relationship between significance and sense, language and utterance, is now viewed in a way strikingly reminiscent of that which Simmel posed between form and life and which had already been anticipated in the romantic philosophy of language of the Vossler school. Thus Vossler could write that each utterance is unrepeatable and each linguistic form repeatable in the terminology of von Humboldt:

...who is able to breathe life again into a sloughed skin and for a second time recreate that unique thing, which has forever flown out of it and out of itself? That life was the inner form, which in the meantime has itself changed and now flows through life in new skins and language forms. (Vossler, 1932: 181-182)

Lebensphilosophie, especially that of the Simmelian sort, dispensed with the psychologism of Vossler's speaking subject, but the relation between life and form that remained was distinctly similar to Vossler's linguistic formulation. Simmel's 'life', like Bakhtin's 'I for myself cannot become an object of experience or knowledge for it is 'a homogenous and undifferentiated process'. It is for this reason that forms are necessary for any intelligibility. The 'manifold of life' is also 'in a state of perpetual flux. It is constantly creating, increasing, and intensifying its own potentialities and energies' It is this self-renewing or reproducing factor that leads Simmel to define life as 'more-life' (Oakes, 1980: 13-14). Life is also able to transcend itself ('the innermost essence of life is its capacity to go out beyond itself, to set its limits by reaching out beyond them, that is, beyond itself), to create new entities, forms or 'objectifications of life', that are 'more than life', they become detached from the flux of life and acquire independence: 'form tears the bit of matter away from the continuity of the next-to-one-another and gives it a meaning of its own, a meaning whose determinateness is incompatible with the streaming of total being, if the latter is truly not to be dammed'. The result is an 'unreconcilable opposition between life and form, or, in other words, between continuity and individuality' which 'appears as the unceasing, usually unnoticed (but also often revolutionary) battle of ongoing life against the historical pattern and formal inflexibility of any given cultural content, thereby becoming the innermost impulse toward social change' (Simmel, 1971: 364-367).

Simmel's philosophy was itself a peculiar brand of *Geltungslogik*. He presented form as the realm of validities/values (for which he borrowed the Hegelian term 'objective spirit'), which were created in historical time but which attain an increasingly remote independence. The creation of objective spirit is a process of objectivisation not unlike Cohen and Natorp's 'production' of the object. Each subject stands at a unique point between historical actuality and the independent realm of validities with the task of making them a unique unity. As he argues in *The Philosophy of Money* (1900): 'Reality and value are, as it were, two different languages by which the logically related contents of the world, valid in their ideal unity, are made comprehensible to the unitary soul, or the languages in which the soul can express the pure image of these contents which lies beyond their differentiation and opposition' (1978: 62). Voloshinov refers to this aspect of Simmel's work affirmatively, but complains that the antinomy between the individual subject and social form does not account for the sign as common to both and creating the possibility for a transcendence of the opposition (1995: 255-256). The same position is developed by one time Marburg School advocate and student of Simmel, Ernst Cassirer, in a posthumously published article that was planned as the concluding chapter of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Speaking a language, argues Cassirer, is not as Simmel's philosophy suggests, governed by an unbridgeable gap between the demands of life and form, individual and society:

On the contrary, it is one and the same process, the living process of speech, in which individuality and universality are contained as equally justified and

equally necessary aspects of the process. The universal is that through which the individual constructs the world, and the universal is what constructs the world of the individual. (Cassirer, 1996: 16-17)

Here we see Cassirer combining the Marburg principle of the construction of the object with the neo-Hegelian stress on the dialectical process of becoming that underlies all his philosophy of that period and which, as I have argued elsewhere, was a powerful influence on Bakhtin in the 1930s and 40s (1997).⁸

The Bakhtin Circle and Contemporary Philosophy of Language

The foregoing analysis of the constellation between the Bakhtin Circle and the idealist philosophers on whose work they drew reveals that the problems of sense, significance and validity are inseparably intertwined in their thought. We can see that Bakhtin, like Husserl and the idealist philosophers that influenced them both, essentially bracketed out the question of existence. They refused to develop a theory of reference beyond the 'production' of objects within the cognitive process and presented the process of understanding in terms of an intersection of intentional horizons (*krugozor*) against the background of a shared (but in the case of Bakhtin socially stratified) culture (Simmel's 'objective spirit') which has persisted for many generations and within which science is granted a special place. If the cutting edge of Simmel's analysis is provided by a tension between objective validity and subjective access to that validity, then in Bakhtin's critical analysis the socially-specific styles that make up the stratified national language embody specific modes of access to objective validity. This is, however, problematic. Such an account does not explain how communication is possible when there is no such culture uniting discursive subjects such as in an encounter between alien civilisations or a historical investigation into fundamentally dissimilar societies. Even when Bakhtin analyses the effects of encounters between different cultures and languages (polyglossia) he does not address the basis upon which communication is possible and only vaguely suggests a wider European culture underlying each regional culture within that. This is one of the effects of the way the *Lebensphilosophen* recast a central element of Hegel's philosophy, as Rose notes:

Dilthey, Simmel and Mannheim claimed that they were 'demystifying' Hegel's notion of 'objective spirit' by detaching it from the rest of his philosophy, and demonstrating that it could have a general, descriptive use. But, by making 'objective spirit' mean the culture, thought or 'world view' of any society they made its relation to other spheres of social life and hence its meaning unclear. In Hegel's thought 'spirit' means the structure of recognition or misrecognition in a society. 'Objective spirit' is inseparable from the absolute spirit, the meaning of history as a whole. (1981: 41)

Cassirer, who also adopted this view of culture, posited a primordial 'mythic consciousness' common to all pre- or proto-civilisations, but he provided no account of the possibility of understanding between members of disparate civilisations which have completed the separation between symbol and object signified. It was perhaps the absence of this factor that led Voloshinov to accept part of N.Ia. Marr's 'Japhetic theory' in which all languages emerged from a single forebear since this would support the principle of a priori forms of consciousness transcending cultural variations. A much more convincing response would, I think, be to say that our cultural conventions are *underlain*

by our common nature as human beings: that is specific biological entities with specific needs and capacities. This leads to a determinate collection of activities constitutive of the human being of any society aimed at meeting those needs, but the way in which those needs are addressed will depend upon the natural resources available, the level and character of technological development and the institutional structure of the society. At the basis of the ability to begin to translate a foreign language, therefore, is the assumption that certain practices are rationally connected to the needs and capacities of human beings as such. This is a variation on Donald Davidson's 'principle of charity' and the so-called 'principle of humanity' developed by, among others, David Wiggins (1980: 222—223). This also, of course, demands a theory of reference that extends beyond the constitution of objects within knowledge and towards an extra-discursive reality that exists independent of our knowledge of it.

Bakhtin often speaks of every utterance having an author in the broad sense and sociologises this conception by speaking of each utterance as an element of discursive intercourse. But both authorship and discursive intercourse depend upon a finite number of meanings (*znachenie*) being available to any given word; indeed, the notion of a word having a meaning at all presupposes a language having been learned rather than our having applied either a shared or individually constituted pre-linguistic meaning to an encountered word. As Wittgenstein taught us, authorship in this broad sense is the exercise of an acquired *ability* to combine words into sentences that can be used in different ways. Indeed, it is through this *practice* that we gain an awareness that words have a determinate range of meanings. This is, of course, one of the points at which the phenomenological and analytical accounts of meaning diverge. Whereas Husserl posited a meaning-bestowing act which Bakhtin translated into terms of authorship, Frege argued a word bears a sense in the mouth of a speaker independent of any mental act endowing it with one, it is already bequeathed to us by past generations and we must learn to employ it. As Dummett notes, the sense of a word needs to be brought to mind in order to judge whether the sentence containing that word is true or false or whether the sentence under consideration logically follows from preceding sentences; the ability to grasp a sense 'is called into play in determining the truth-value of the sentence, or attending to particular features of the manner in which its truth-value may be determined' (1993: 103-104).

For Bakhtin, a sentence cannot itself elicit a response, having no direct contact with *life*, with other utterances, and not having 'meaningful (*smyslovoy*) fullness of value'. All these things it gains through becoming all or part of the linguistic element of an utterance (1996: 175). On becoming an utterance the grammatical form is imbued with intentionality and thereby sense. One might argue that while this may describe our general exchange of thoughts, verbal communication depends on our capacity to be able to call upon the literal sense of the sentence even if it is within a larger utterance. Thus, while I may agree with the general thrust of Bakhtin's essay-utterance 'The Problem of Discursive Genres', I may hold a particular sentence-proposition to be in error, or that it fails to follow from previous sentences. Bakhtin's response to this point is to argue that in so doing we bring about a 'special syntactic aberration' in which the sentence acquires a degree of completion necessary for response to occur, it is 'thought into' (*domyslivat'*) a position where it is transformed into an utterance (1996: 185-186). Treating

the sentence in such a way is illegitimate, for Bakhtin, because it has not been transformed into an utterance by means of a meaning-bestowing act.

From Subjecthood to Agency

Whatever the Bakhtinian fears evoked by formal semantics, the prior establishment of a certain finite and relatively stable range of linguistic meanings for each syntactically combinable word is a necessary precondition for discursive intercourse as such. Bakhtin's shifting phenomenology from a philosophy of the subject bestowing meaning monologically to one doing so dialogically leaves the basic inversion of Husserl's account untouched. This indicates the residues of the myth of a sovereign subjectivity that resides in the theory, which can be remedied by the adoption of an adequate account of agency in which language provides an enabling structure for the potential articulation of beliefs, desires, interests and reasons for action. This would not, I believe, dispense with the centrality of evaluation in Bakhtin's theory, but merely recast it. As Charles Taylor has argued, 'strong evaluation deploys a language of evaluative distinctions, in which different desires are described as noble or base, integrating or fragmenting, courageous or cowardly, clairvoyant or blind and so on' indeed, such a contrastive vocabulary is a precondition of our ability to evaluate effectively (1985: 19). The Bakhtinian approach is, however, particularly productive with regard those parts of language study that analytical philosophy tends to ignore: discursive units that fall between the sentence and the shared sign system that constitutes a language as a whole. The concept of the socially stratified national language, heteroglossia (*raznorechie*), the generic characteristics of utterances and the modality of interaction between utterances are all very fruitful in developing an understanding of the dynamics of verbal communication within a social environment, however, even these notions are founded on distinctly questionable philosophical premises drawn from the correspondence of sphere of intercourse with the object domains of individual sciences the validity of which is simply assumed.

Bakhtin's account of discursive genres could productively be combined with Wittgenstein's notion of language games which are institutions in the sense of being rule-bound self-referential collective practices (Bloor, 1997: 27-42) but which are also underlain by economic and social structures which lend a relative stability to the perspectives and types of evidence that are regarded as authoritative and compelling. Such a theory would mitigate against the tendency within Wittgenstein's theory to treat language use as perhaps too much like any other social practice, while the institutional structure missing from Bakhtinian theory could be better integrated into a generic account of discursive practice. Such an account would, however, involve a much less naive approach to the question of science than that which the Bakhtin Circle inherited from the neo-Kantians, for academia as much as any other sphere of social interaction, needs to be related to the social, economic and political structures that influence, and in some cases determine the direction and parameters of scientific investigation. Towards the end of his career Bakhtin addresses the question of an ideally objective perspective being a precondition for dialogue, and he names this 'third' the *superaddressee* (*nadaddressat*), 'the absolutely just responsive understanding of whom is supposed either at a metaphysical distance or in distant historical time' (1996: 337). But, typically, Bakhtin abstracts this notion of intellectual authority

from the process of socialisation in which we learn to use a language to say things about the extra-discursive world. Wittgenstein (1969: § 493) and Quine (1960: 5-8) both provide a superior account of this phenomenon. A perspective like the one I am proposing would also set ethical relations, like other cultural phenomena, firmly within the institutional structure of a society with the same considerations of authority and evidence as any other but in a form specific to that particular language game. As Lovibond (1983) has shown, such a perspective may be described as Wittgenstinian on the inside and Hegelian, in the sense of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, on the outside.

The Bakhtinian purist may see little left of Bakhtin in such a perspective, but this would be to fail to recognise that what I have been critically engaging are the philosophical underpinnings of Bakhtin's theory more than his own specific conceptual structure; to use a metaphor from an earlier time, I have been attempting to extract the rational core from the mystical shell. Bakhtin's stylistically and ideologically stratified national language, heteroglossia, remains intact, but it can now be correlated to the institutional structures that underlie that stratification rather than standing unsupported. Style and ideology are related in terms of patterns of language usage rather than by a typology of meaning-bestowing act. Monologism and dialogism describe the hegemonic principles at work in established relations of authority and challenges to those relations, they describe whether these are autocratic and authoritarian or democratic and liberating. Dialogism as *ideologiekritik* is the process of uncovering the socially specific interests that lie behind particular institutionally-bound meaning-making practices for which are claimed a disinterested objectivity. Thus shifting the locus of validity and value from the a priori realm of Ideas to the underlying structures of social interaction allows us to develop Bakhtin's insights into an account of language use that is firmly grounded among the conflict-ridden social, economic and political forces that shape our lives.

- ¹ Voloshinov was translating Bühler's 1922 article on syntax into Russian in the late 1920s, and he openly acknowledged the importance of Marty's work in the early drafts of *Marksizm i filosofii iazyka*. On this see Voloshinov (1995a). The influence of Bühler and Marty will be systematically assessed in my forthcoming articles.
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- 2 The corresponding passage in the 1963 edition, from which the English translation is taken replaces the word 'intentional' (*intentsional'noe*) with 'fully-signifying' (*polnoznachnoe*) and 'intention' (*intentsiia*) with 'directedness' (*napravlennost'*), thus weakening the phenomenological colouration of the original version.
- 3 Translation adjusted to render *Wirklichkeit* as actuality rather than reality and thereby to correspond to the Russian *deistvitel'nost'* as used by Bakhtin as their rootedness in the notion of action is common to each and probably determined Bakhtin's own choice of the term. Bakhtin also uses the term *realnost'* which more accurately corresponds to the German *Realität* for reality.
- 4 In *Platons Ideenlehre* Natorp argued that in his later dialogues Plato unambiguously showed that the Idea is not a 'thing in itself or a metaphysical essence but a 'method, a foundation, the basis of pure thinking which creates being; it is a regulatory idea, a normative cognition with the help of which a given undefined X is defined as an object' (Bakradze, 1960: 266).
- 5 Husserl (1972: 95n2, 169n1, 214-18, 218n.1) acknowledges his debt to Lotze and Natorp, showing the neo-Kantian roots of the 'noemata'.
- 6 'Objective validity signifies a validity independent of the subjectivity of knowledge ... what is to be objectively valid, is to be valid apart from the givenness of its representation in this or that consciousness' (Natorp 1981: 252-253).
- 7 Kant (1994: 55) The original reads: 'Empirische Urtheile, so fern sie objektive Gültigkeit haben, sind *Erfahrungsurtheile*; die aber, so nur subjektiv gültig sind, nenne ich bloße *Wahrnehmungsurtheile*.' *Kant's Werke* (1903: 298) (original emphasis).
- 8 Willey (1978: 120) shows that the drift towards Hegel was well established in the Marburg school before Cassirer's central work.