

An Essay on Pedagogy by Mikhail M. Bakhtin

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This is an extended summary of a pedagogic essay by Mikhail M. Bakhtin on writing style, titled "Dialogic Origin and Dialogic Pedagogy of Grammar: Stylistics as Part of Russian Language Instruction in Secondary School." In this essay, written in spring 1945 while Bakhtin was a secondary school teacher of Russian language arts, he argues that every grammatical form is a representation of reality and needs to be taught in relation to stylistic choices; otherwise, grammar instruction is pedantic and leads students to write in a deadening bookish style. Bakhtin describes and analyzes a lesson on the stylistic force of parataxic sentences. He asks students to identify the voice and psychological expression conveyed in examples from Pushkin and Gogol, so they may recover the liveliness in their expression that they had in their younger grades, but at a higher level of cultural development. He finds that after instruction, students use more parataxic sentences, increasing the liveliness of their writing.

Keywords: *teaching style; teaching grammar; writing in secondary education; dialogic pedagogy; stylistics*

From 1942 to 1945, Mikhail M. Bakhtin worked as a teacher of Russian language arts in the administrative district of Tver about 200 km north of Moscow, at railroad school No. 39 in Savelovo and secondary school No. 14 in the nearby city of Kimry. In spring 1945, he wrote a draft of an essay on pedagogy based on a demonstration lesson he appears to have given on or about April 18 of that year to a 7th-year class (students of about age 14-15).

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Although he taught in the Pedagogical Institute (teaching teachers and literacy scholars) in Saransk (the capital of the Mordovian Autonomous Republic, now a part of the Russian Federation) from 1936 to 1937 and from 1945 to 1961, this appears to be Bakhtin's only essay on pedagogy, and it certainly is the only one translated into English (Matusov, 2004). It was only first published in 1994 in the journal *Russkaia Slovesnost'*, with commentary by L. S. Melikhov. This essay, translated into English by L. A. Gogotishvili, was published in a special issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* (2004), published by M. E. Sharpe, followed by commentary and notes. The special issue of *JREEP* was edited by Eugene Matusov. The editor's introduction and nine further commentaries on Bakhtin's article by psychological and educational researchers provide multiple perspectives on its value and contemporary usefulness.

Because Bakhtin has been so influential in contemporary composition and writing studies and because this pedagogic essay focuses on teaching stylistic choice-making in writing, it is appropriate that *Written Communication* extend the conversation assessing the essay to include two leading interpreters of Bakhtin in composition, Frank Farmer and Kay Halasek, and one of the leading scholars of style in writing, Joseph Williams.

We encourage *Written Communication's* readers to read Bakhtin's full essay and notes along with the 10 commentaries in *JREEP*. For those who do not have access to the journal, I provide this summary of Bakhtin's essay of about 5,000 words in translation.

DIALOGIC ORIGIN AND DIALOGIC PEDAGOGY OF GRAMMAR: STYLISTICS AS PART OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Without constantly considering the stylistic significance of grammatical choices, the instruction of grammar inevitably turns into scholasticism. In practice, however, the instructor very rarely provides any sort of stylistic interpretation of the grammatical forms covered in class.

Every grammatical form is at the same time a means of representing reality. Particularly in instances where the speaker or writer may choose between two or more equally grammatically correct syntactic forms, the choice is determined not by grammatical but by the representative and expressive effectiveness of these forms. Teaching syntax

without providing stylistic elucidation and without attempting to enrich the students' own speech does not help them improve the creativity of their own speech productions. Teaching the parataxic sentence [Translator's note: a complex sentence without a subordinating conjunction] is particularly productive for training students to use language creatively.

Parataxic sentences are encountered very rarely in the independent written work of students in the upper grades. In a study of about 300 8th-grade essays, I encountered only three parataxic sentences. In approximately 80 essays by 10th-grade students during the same period, I found a total of seven. On the other hand, 8th- and 10th-grade students were able to take dictation using parataxic sentences with very few punctuation errors. When students encounter a parataxic sentence in a printed text, they understand it with little difficulty. Nonetheless, they are completely unable to use this form in their own writing and cannot work with it creatively.

This inability to use parataxis in their own writing results from stylistic significance of this splendid form never being properly explained to them. To show how the stylistic significance of parataxis can be taught, I presented three sample texts in the classroom.

I read aloud the first example, from Pushkin: "Sad am I: no friend beside me," with maximum expressiveness and facial gestures, reinforcing its inherent drama. After the sentence has made an immediate artistic impression on the students, the instructor can analyze the means by which this expressiveness is achieved. The analysis is aided by turning the sentence into a normal complex sentence with a subordinating conjunction. In this first example, we insert the conjunction *since* mechanically without altering the word order: "Sad am I since [I have] no friend beside me." Through discussion, the students conclude that the sentence with the conjunction cannot be left in this inverted form. The normal logical order of the words must be restored: "I am sad since I have no friend beside me." Through this exercise, the students also learn that leaving out or inserting a conjunction is not a simple mechanical process; it affects the order of words in the sentence and thus the allocation of emphasis among the words.

We next ask the students how the hypotaxial sentence they have constructed differs from Pushkin's original sentence. They readily reply that our restructuring has destroyed the expressiveness of Pushkin's sentence and made it colder, drier, and more logical. The sentence, according to the students, has become more pedantic, mute,

suited for silent reading, and no longer begs to be read aloud. To explain the loss of expressiveness in the altered sentence, we first analyze the subordinating conjunctions *since* and *because*. We direct the students' attention to an unwieldiness and lack of euphony in these conjunctions that has led to them being used rarely in artistic literature. We point out, semantically, that subordinating conjunctions designate the purely logical relationships between clauses and are completely devoid of any concrete and imaginable meaning. For this reason, they will never be able to acquire metaphorical meaning, cannot be used ironically, and cannot support emotional intonation. We next call students' attention to the stylistic meaning of word order in a sentence and how multisyllabic conjunctions can affect the intonational stress on the first word in a clause.

The second example is also by Pushkin: "He'd start to laugh—they'd all guffaw." The analysis follows a similar instructional pattern of reading the original sentence aloud for stylistic dramatic effect and then inserting alternative conjunctions for comparison. Here, the analysis highlights the difficulties of finding a conjunction to capture all the meaning implied in the parataxic connection of the two clauses while emphasizing the economic contrasts in meaning, feeling, and dramatic action between the two clauses.

The third example is from Gogol: "He awoke: five stations had already fled past in the opposite direction." The dynamic dramatism of the first two examples is even more highly developed in this sentence, albeit in a somewhat different way. Exaggerated intonation, facial expression, and gesture convey the pleasant astonishment of the awakened traveler who finds that his coach had already passed by five stations. Wordy description cannot completely convey what was dramatically played out before our eyes. Students' attention is directed toward the bold metaphoric expression, almost a personification, which Gogol uses: "Five stations had already fled past in the opposite direction." Rephrasing produces a new sentence that leaves absolutely nothing of Gogol's headlong and bold gesture.

Students practice stylistic choices using parataxis and hypotaxis by writing on set topics using various complex sentences with and without conjunctions, carefully weighing the stylistic appropriateness of each form. In checking homework and class work, I note cases where it seems desirable to substitute a parataxic form for a hypotactic one and make the appropriate stylistic revisions. When the work is gone over in class, all these sentences are read and discussed. At

times, the “authors” do not agree with my editorial revisions, and lively and interesting disputes take place.

The result of all this work was fully satisfactory. Two hundred compositions written by these 7th graders during the second semester contained more than 70 examples of parataxis. In the 10th grade, the results were even better: Almost every composition contained two or three paratactic sentences. This change in syntactic structure also led to a more vivid, more concrete, and emotional style. The improved style began to reveal the personality of the writers, so that their own living individual intonation could be heard. Students understand and really enjoy stylistic analyses, even the most subtle and meticulous, as long as they are conducted in a lively manner and the class members are encouraged to be active participants.

Teachers of Russian have learned through experience that their students’ written language typically undergoes a very drastic change. In the lower grades, there is no sharp distinction between the students’ written and oral language. The language in their written work, although somewhat clumsy, is lively, concrete, and emotional. Although this childish language may be awkward, it manages to reveal the writer’s individuality. In grades seven through nine, however, students begin to write in a self-consciously literary and bookish style and begin to fear any original expression that does not resemble the clichés in their books. They write for the eyes and do not go over what they have written by reading aloud using intonation and gesture. Their language becomes more formally correct; however, it is depersonalized, colorless, and lackluster.

The instructor must now foster another change in the students’ written language, so that once again it is close to lively and expressive oral language, the language of actual life. But this resemblance has to occur at a higher level of cultural development. The depersonalized, bookish language—especially when it naively shows off its bookishness—is a sign of a half-educated writer. A fully cultured and mature person does not use such language.

Language has a powerful effect on the thought processes of the person who generates it. Helping the student assimilate the living, creative language of the people requires a large number and variety of instructional forms and methods. Among these forms, units on parataxis provide powerful weapons for combating depersonalized bookish language. As students assimilate parataxic sentences into their written language, depersonalized, bookish clichés will fade and

the individual intonation of the writer will begin to show through. The instructor need only provide flexible and careful guidance to facilitate this process of the birth of the student's individual language.

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