

*Responses to Bakhtin's  
"Dialogic Origins and  
Dialogic Pedagogy of  
Grammar: Stylistics as  
Part of Russian Language  
Instruction in Secondary  
Schools"*

*Further Responses and a Tentative Conclusion*

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*The three authors writing on Bakhtin's essay, "Dialogic Origin and Dialogic Pedagogy of Grammar"—Farmer, Halasek, and Williams—respond to one another, and Bazerman provides a summative comment in the paragraphs that follow. The responses explore further some of Bakhtin's thoughts concerning rhetoric and its relation to stylistics and his use of the concept of hero as a grammatical category. The discussion of Bakhtin leads to more general questions of the relation between spontaneous utterance and situationality and the implications for the possibility of a systematic grammar of style. Nonetheless, the*

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*commentators agree on Bakhtin's explicit pedagogy and the interanimation of everyday speech with literary examples. The editor's final comment notes a tension that informs all these responses, that is, between explicit teaching, on one hand, and avoiding formulaic writing, on the other. Bakhtin's changing view of the relation of dialectics and dialogue is discussed as well.*

**Keywords:** *dialogue and dialectic; rhetoric and stylistics; teaching stylistics; teaching grammar; grammar of style; Bakhtin's concept of hero*

### FRANK FARMER'S RESPONSE TO HALASEK AND WILLIAMS

Kay Halasek shows that in "Dialogic Origin," we once again encounter a Bakhtin whose ideas are strikingly compatible with some of our discipline's most cherished truisms about language and pedagogy. Or to put this point in Bakhtinian terms, we perpetually find in Bakhtin a thinker whose ideas are comfortable, presciently familiar, known—in a word, *given*. At the same time, we always discover in Bakhtin, as well, a thinker whose ideas represent something yet to be achieved—a task, a project, a freshly illuminated problem (to echo the words of Vološinov's epigram). And of course, it is the latter of these Bakhtins that most compels us to enter into dialogue with his ideas. For Halasek, I think, Bakhtin's pedagogical essay offers us an urgent, albeit longstanding, occasion for a particular dialogue that must continue, a specific task that must yet be achieved.

For it appears that, once again, we are called on to lay bare the rhetorical features of Bakhtin's thought. In my response, I simply assumed the rhetoricality of his understanding of style—and by implication, his teaching of style. In retrospect, I may have avoided the problem out of exasperation, of not wanting to explain to others how Bakhtinian stylistics is thoroughly rhetorical. That, at least, would be a flattering way to explain my sidestepping of the question. But it may well be that I feared I might discover Bakhtinian stylistics to be opposed or indifferent to rhetoric altogether. After all, when Bakhtin assigns to grammar an "inherent representational and expressive potential," we are encouraged to consider what grammar might encompass if it were not limited to strictly formal understandings. That is, we are invited to regard the stylistic (but not the rhetorical) potentials of grammar. And because Bakhtin pegs expression and representation as the two qualities most associated with the stylistics he desires, we may also be inclined to think Bakhtin understands style strictly as a literary category. Problems of expression and representation, traditionally at

least, are more commonly understood to be aesthetic rather than rhetorical concerns.

Halasek, thankfully, does not sidestep the question of rhetoric. She points out what Bakhtin understands but does not address, namely, that the stylistic choices he sets forth have “demonstrable rhetorical effects,” that the grammatical choices he attempts to illuminate are rhetorical choices. To make explicit the connection between literary and everyday discourses, she reminds us of that often-overlooked figure, the hero who, in literary discourse, can be easily conflated into a main or central character but who, in nonartistic genres, personifies the theme and may be located as the subject point on a rhetorical triangle. When heroes are understood in thematic ways, even the literary utterance, whether voiced by a character, a narrator, or an implied author, is irrevocably and simultaneously a rhetorical utterance as well. Moreover, as a teacher, Halasek is interested in the “generative effect” of having students play with forms that include such themed heroes. If every representation, literary or otherwise, is addressed, and if every expression is likewise directed toward someone or something, then exercises that have students explore heroic forms represent rhetorical play of a very sophisticated order.

Finally, Halasek draws on the recent work of James Zappen to direct our attention to a functional kinship between dialogue and rhetoric: the potential of each to be deployed in service to a Socratic-inspired testing and contesting of ideas. Noting Zappen’s argument that Bakhtin doesn’t quarrel with rhetoric so much as he does an impoverished understanding of it, Halasek leaves us with a suggestion that Bakhtin’s target is not traditional linguistics, conventional grammar instruction, rhetoric, or even certain understandings of literature. It is the formalist premises that underwrite each of these that Bakhtin objects to, that he cannot entirely escape himself, and that remain with us to this day. It may be overcoming the formalisms of our own time that make up our particular “yet to be achieved.” Kay Halasek demonstrates the crucial importance of rhetoric to that task.

What interests Joe Williams might be charted out along rather different lines. First, we are reminded of Bakhtin’s definition of the utterance as an unrepeatable phenomenon. Williams implies that if this were truly the case, Bakhtin could not generalize about language in the familiar ways that he does and, more pointedly, that Bakhtin could not deploy the teaching method that he describes in his pedagogical essay. The “systematic treatment” that Bakhtin advocates, Williams

correctly notes, would be “impossible in principle.” A second key point occurs in that momentous shift of terms that Williams offers—namely, the (dialogically inspired) substitution of response for expression. This substitution is so thoroughly Bakhtinian that it is surprising (and a little disappointing) that Bakhtin did not offer it himself.

In raising these two points, Williams articulates the central difficulty for enacting the kind of teaching Bakhtin has in mind: How is it possible to “correlate a particular response with a particular syntactic feature”? In the closing paragraph to my response, I mused on the (im)possibility of a handbook or style book authored by Bakhtin. I am relieved that Williams entertained the idea of a distinctly Bakhtinian grammar as well, but I think we may have understood the problem differently. Where Williams understood the difficulty to reside in the correlation between response and syntax, I could not figure out how the correlation between extraverbal context and syntax could possibly be accounted for, at least in any comprehensive way. To revise the question that Williams asks, Would we first identify syntactic structures and then attempt to catalogue all the situations where a particular structure would fit? Or, rather, would we first attempt to catalogue all situations and then present the appropriate syntactic structure for a given context? If, as Vološinov (1976) informs us, it is intonation that establishes a “firm link between verbal discourse and extraverbal context” (p. 102), and if Bakhtin relies so heavily on both intonation (and gesture) in his teaching, would not Bakhtin’s fictional handbook look a lot like Gilbert Austin’s *Chironomia*, replete with voice instructions, illustrations of hand gestures and body postures, various movements and motions, and so on? And would we not be right to regard Bakhtin’s handbook as a possibly entertaining but ultimately wrongheaded attempt to codify that which is inexhaustible and beyond our classifications?

While there may be limits to the kind of teaching Bakhtin proposes, those limits do not invalidate his methods or his efforts. Williams likes Bakhtin’s approach, his “direct teaching,” and so do I. But unless we include within our pedagogies some attempt to correlate linguistic instruction with what Vološinov calls extraverbal context, I think we do our students a disservice. Bakhtin shows us one way to do this; Williams shows us another. By directing our attention to the historical circumstances of Bakhtin’s writing, and the possible Aesopian pressures that Bakhtin must have felt, we have another way by which to consider Bakhtin’s own language choices. I am grateful to Joseph Williams for reminding us of how the extraverbal context of Bakhtin’s

utterance might have had a shaping influence on what Bakhtin had to say and, therefore, of what each of us had to say in response, not only to Bakhtin but to each other.

#### KAY HALASEK'S RESPONSE TO FARMER AND WILLIAMS

That three scholars—all of whom are deeply invested in rhetoric and writing instruction—would formulate some strikingly similar responses to Bakhtin's "Dialogic Origin" should, perhaps, not come as a surprise to me. But it does. As I read Joe Williams's and Frank Farmer's essays and revisited mine, I was struck that all three of us comment, rather prominently, on two elements in "Dialogic Origin": the image of Bakhtin as teacher and his emphasis on style as functioning beyond grammatical form (and perhaps beyond teachers' abilities to instruct students well in this subject). We catch a "glimpse," Farmer tells us, into Bakhtin's classroom, where we witness his strategies for improving his students' writing. This is not, I was reminded as I read Williams's opening description, the Bakhtin I have envisioned all these years—weakened by years of chronic ill health, chain-smoking, and debilitating political maneuverings. Here is a man dedicated to teaching writing, someone challenged by and committed to a pedagogical goal. And here is (as Farmer feared he might not be) a man who employs the concepts that inform his theoretical work as he seeks to untangle the knotted threads of his students' prose.

At the same time, and despite our enthusiastic response to "Dialogic Origin," we all find, as Williams puts it, "nothing in this essay [that] asks me to reconsider my views," or as Farmer notes, "nothing new or particularly earth shattering about" Bakhtin's suggestion that we value our students' quotidian discourses. I note that the essay is a "comfortable text for me" as I "find Bakhtin articulating pedagogical and methodological principles that inform current teaching practices in composition." If the text is this comfortable or even (some might argue) underwhelming, we might ask its value. My much considered response—formulated only here, as I engage Bakhtin, Farmer, and Williams—is that its value rests in its generative power as evidenced in the collective responses before you.

As I consider all four of these pieces as a whole, as dialogically engaged, I find a complex and nuanced reading of Bakhtin, one that manifests itself for me only as I engage the essays in terms of one another. The reading began to take shape with Williams's comments

on the (im)possibility of constructing a reliable, systematic grammar. Such a grammar, he notes, depends on response (and, in fact, the grammar is a grammar of response). Like Bakhtin's internally persuasive and authoritative discourses, grammar is contextualized, situated on the borders between writer and reader. No genre is, by definition, authoritative—although, as Bakhtin notes, some genres lend themselves more often to authoritative readings. The same is true, Williams argues, with grammar. No one style is in and of itself “dense,” for example, although we can “construct an inventory of rough correlations” between style and such an expression of its effect on a reader.

Like Williams, I read “Dialogic Origin” in terms of my own projects, my own previous engagements with both Bakhtin and composition studies. Williams makes his claim simply and elegantly: Bakhtin “makes style important beyond itself.” (I comment on Bakhtin's treatment of style but also note that I am somewhat disappointed that Bakhtin didn't move more fully to consider the rhetorical implications of style.) Williams, however, engages that question differently, pushing us to consider that political implications (and perhaps motivations) might be inferred from Bakhtin's essay itself, that this “safe topic [of improving student writing] . . . masks a riskier one, but not so obviously as to invite a 3 a.m. knock on the door.” I read, I realize in retrospect, too literally, too much in terms of the pedagogical to see the political implied through and informed by the pedagogical. Of course. Now it makes perfect sense. Bakhtin's motives likely step beyond improving style and into the political. The “clichéd and depersonalized language of textbooks” likely does “stand for the language of Soviet bureaucrats,” as Williams argues. Teaching to (and from) the text means teaching students not only to mimic the “literary and bookish . . . clichéd and depersonalized” “language of literature texts” (a point Farmer makes) but also to adopt the constraining ideology that informs them.

Farmer takes the literature issue head on—but from a less explicitly political perspective than Williams. Here, Farmer provides us with that larger view of this Bakhtin in terms of the other Bakhtins who come before and after, and in that context, we see dramatic continuity—both within this essay and across Bakhtin's work. The literary and the quotidian, Farmer argues, exist in dialogic relation to one another, each interanimating the other. He does not stop here, however, in his analysis. The relationship between the literary and the quotidian is “hardly a nostalgic one” as Bakhtin understands quotidian

discourses for their rhetorical value. Bakhtin “wants,” Farmer argues, “to return to the language of actual life ‘at a higher level of cultural development.’” This is not simply a matter of “students’ rights to their own language”; this is a matter of teaching students strategic use of those languages, and a matter of teachers acknowledging their “artfulness as well.” Farmer finds Bakhtin illustrating through his teaching the reflexive, the dialogic. The literary and quotidian interanimate one another just as life and art interanimate one another. One is answerable to the other. Only by presenting to our students the “relationship between everyday and literary languages” are we able to meet the terms of answerable “no alibi” teaching, teaching that requires us to practice and teach “reflexive awareness” and “contextual understanding,” two hallmarks of the Bakhtinian pedagogy that Farmer finds in “Dialogic Origin.”

What does all of this mean? For Williams, Farmer, and me, it points ultimately to responsibility, what I refer to (following Bakhtin) as “no alibi teaching.” As Williams writes, “Bakhtin’s real but hidden ‘hero’ is our duty as teachers of writing.”

#### JOSEPH M. WILLIAMS’S RESPONSE TO FARMER AND HALASEK

Professors Halasek and Farmer both point out the generative power of Bakhtin’s work. It is so rich in so many ways that it urges us to think more clearly even about matters that we’ve already thought hard about. Professor Halasek’s discussion of *hero*, for example, helped me to think through the usefulness of that term. As noted in footnote 3, *hero* as a syntactic term might best be understood as a noun phrase (or clause) that’s a surface structure subject naming an agent or goal of an explicit action. This sense of *hero* (at the sentence level) de-metaphorizes the Russian term *geroy* that Bakhtin used to name a central figure in a fiction. If that’s so, then using the term *hero* at the sentence level may not have been the best choice to translate the Russian term. Its metaphoric force does enliven a cold syntactic category, but perhaps with too many unhelpful associations. It’s not clear to me that the clause “what that term means” in “What that term means puzzles me” should be called a *hero* rather than the less dramatic but more accurate term *topic*.

I’m encouraged by Professor Halasek’s recommendation that students play with subjects of sentences to see the rhetorical effect of different ones, an exercise that has some currency. Many exercises in

*Style*, for example, ask students to do just that, and many of its textual analyses demonstrate the effect of different choices in a variety of texts. Analyzing the choice of one subject over another is also standard practice in that project known as “critical linguistics” or “critical discourse analysis” (although its cognitive foundation has recently been challenged).<sup>1</sup>

I think Professor Halasek may underestimate the rhetorical impulse in Bakhtin’s analyses when she says that he “relies exclusively on stylistics, ignoring the demonstrable rhetorical effects of the stylistic choices.” As I suggest in my essay, Bakhtin’s terms in fact translate judgments about response into judgments about expression. If that’s so, then the choice not to “have” any of the writerly qualities Bakhtin deplors, “pallid,” for example, is a rhetorical one (assuming, of course, that a conscious choice to elicit one response or another is a rhetorical act). I wish Bakhtin had talked about response more exactly, but given how few others in the history of the study of style focus on its specific literal effects on readers, we can’t fault him for so common a failure.

Professor Farmer’s first point about voice asks us to think hard about voice. Our students’ unself-conscious speech is often lively and even artful, but it’s been my experience that when they try to carry the spirit or style of that voice into their writing, its benefits are at best uneven. Were an exuberant and lively voice enough, we wouldn’t have to comment on the coherence of their ideas or, dare I say it, the correctness of their language. I think that what Bakhtin celebrates in his students’ writing is its contrast to the deadly dullness of so much academic writing. But most of us aim at neither of those extremes when we teach students to write for the quotidian (or academic) world.

Moreover, this whole issue of voice is, I believe, another example of a judgment about response translated into a judgment about a writer or his text (spoken or written): “You’ve finally found your genuine voice” means something like, “My eyes no longer glaze over when I read your writing.” The question is then what it is on the page, read in its particular context, that causes me to say that.

Professor Farmer’s useful second point asks us to rethink our easy dismissal of literary texts to teach writing: Although many of us have given them up as the most relevant models of writing, such texts can provide good examples for teaching style. When we show that such features occur in both literary and everyday writing, students see both that mundane texts are not so far from high literature as some



might think and that the language of high literature isn't always so rarified that its features are unavailable for their own work.

On his third point, can we write a grammar of style, we agree: It would be a stiff task, although a proposal for one certainly encourages hard thinking and maybe even some effort doing. At worst, we'd end up with a grab bag of debated features and responses—by no means a waste of time.

#### FINAL COMMENT FROM CHARLES BAZERMAN

The responses of Frank Farmer, Kay Halasek, and Joe Williams, as might be expected from people deeply and practically engaged in the teaching of writing, focus closely on Bakhtin's understanding of language and his understanding of students' understanding, in order to be able to lead students to more skilled uses of language. Each of the responses struggles with the puzzle that Bakhtin as a teacher struggles with—how to maintain the freshness, uniqueness, and local responsiveness of utterances, even as we provide students more sophisticated tools of analysis and reflective choice making. Such tools form a *techne* abstracted from the particularities of circumstances and the expressive impulses of speakers addressing responsive interlocutors who extend the speakers' possibilities of meaning by their presence to be addressed.

This struggle between bringing explicit orderly tools to language practice and making language ever new within circumstances illuminates a side of Bakhtin's essay not explored in the special issue of the *Journal of Russian and Eastern European Psychology* in which the full translation of Bakhtin's essay appears. Those responses, as appropriate to the disciplinary focus of that journal, comment on Bakhtin's philosophy of education, pedagogy, and mode of inquiry. Only George Kamberlis's (2004) response, "(Re)reading Bakhtin as Poetic Grammarian and Strategic Pedagogue" (pp. 95-105), shows a similar concern for Bakhtin's explicit teachings about language and language learning but stops short of considering the problem of composing, of using the sophisticated understanding of language for crafting fresh utterances that carry the flavor and impulse of one person speaking to another.

In this current symposium, Farmer, Halasek, and Williams all approve Bakhtin's impulse to teach grammar as a matter of stylistic and rhetorical choice and admire his critical taste in identifying

exemplary texts and features of language worthy of student attention. Each further supports Bakhtin's explicitness of teaching of these features to demonstrate the power and exquisiteness of language. Yet each also gets caught on the puzzle of how that explicit teaching will avoid becoming a formula, a pallid formalism that students reproduce without voice. Halasek further applauds the experimental character of Bakhtin's inquiry, with student writing of paratactic sentences as the outcome measure. But the data are reported quantitatively only, so we have no clue as to how the students used the stylistic recommendation for paratactic sentences—expressively or formulaically, extending or deadening the meaning potential of the moment. In short, our snapshot of Bakhtin's classroom is itself too pallid to tell us how successful the lesson was in Bakhtin's own terms. So in the end, the commentators are left to discuss his ideas and teaching practice rather than their living consequence in the world.

Halasek admires the rhetorical force of considering the subject of a sentence as a hero but finds Bakhtin's stylistics in practice not rhetorical enough. She finds Bakhtin admiring the niceness of literary representations, rather than the rhetorical force of utterances acting on an audience. Williams, a renowned advocate for the explicit teaching of style, counters that Bakhtin's stylistic comments directly imply an audience response or lack thereof ("pallid"). Williams starts his own account with the image of Bakhtin exaggeratedly acting out to the class the lines to be analyzed so they may hear the voices within them, and he ends considering the impossibility of Bakhtin's program of a dictionary of style that draws together syntactic features with reader responses that can then be taught to students. Williams, at most, foresees an inventory for students to deploy as they see appropriate to circumstances. Farmer, in his comment on Williams, discusses further the impossibility of such a dictionary, for it would need to be a two-sided dictionary of situations and figures, neither of which could be determinant, given the creativity and variety of life and human language making. Yet, Farmer too praises Bakhtin's raising students' conscious awareness of the force of language, even with the danger that they will lose the naïve force of their spontaneous younger writing. Farmer tries to understand what Bakhtin means by stating that the students will return to living language at a "higher level of cultural development."

What is it that must be maintained so as not to let the explicit teaching of the fine points of language become a pedantic form of literary connoisseurship? How is it that students may maintain their living

engagement with language even as they become more skilled, reflective artisans of an explicit *techne* of language?

What are we to make of Bakhtin, who often excoriated Hegelian dialectics, now making this dialectical move, but one that does not fully transform the opposing terms of naïve living language and stylistic awareness into a synthetic abstract language, but rather leaves them in dialogue with a higher level of practice? A Dialectical Dialogics? On this point, Farmer acutely points to a relevant passage in the *Speech Genres* essay.

And finally, what are we to make of Bakhtin's privileging of parataxis, an associative form of expression and thought usually associated with earlier stages of development? Certainly, this is how Vygotsky treats them, to be made orderly and transformed by maturing syntactic thought and expression, at first organized by our own spontaneous concepts, and then later to be brought under the umbrella of disciplined, schooled, scientific, communal concepts. Yet Bakhtin's parataxis is a skilled, artful parataxis and not a spontaneous one of uncontrolled associations; what kind of parataxis is that? Is this simply a literary mode of representation that captures the state of mind of literary characters overcome by experiences, crafted by an artist who sees precisely what is going on? Or is this another emanation of dialectical dialogics? A recognition that as much as we attempt to order and come to terms with life, experience always exceeds the bounds of our language? A recognition that we must come to respect the associative wisdom of our intuitions, the strange and enlightening conjunctions of experience and thought leading us to new edges of the barely sensed?

I would like to think that Bakhtin sensed and attempted to imbue his students with a sense of language making residing at the edge of knowing and living, neither pedantic nor naïve, nor pedantically naïve—but meaningfully artful. I would like to think that his students grew in their engagement with the living world through his exercises. I do not know that such was Bakhtin's view nor whether students extended the reach of their spontaneous expression through this classroom exercise. Whatever Bakhtin's intention, students may have learned only tricks of lively prose, simulacra to tease the imaginative senses of an audience of literary consumers. The answer may lie in the now lost details of his experiment and a closer analysis of the data of the student outcomes writing. I do know that Bakhtin and the commentators here struggle with these problems and have also done so, by their accounts, in their classrooms.

### NOTE

1. An insightful critique of critical linguistics can be found in O'Halloran (2003).

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