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A DIALOGIC PERSPECTIVE ON ORAL TRADITION



UMA PERSPECTIVA DIALÓGICA NA TRADIÇÃO ORAL

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[RESUMO](#) | [INDEXAÇÃO](#) | [TEXTO](#) | [REFERÊNCIAS](#) | [CITAR ESTE ARTIGO](#) | [O AUTOR](#)
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Abstract

Oral tradition has a long history of research both in linguistics and anthropology, being the vast corpus of ethnic narrative one of its main achievements. This outstanding documentation of worldwide cultural verbal creations has to a certain degree already been published, other materials remain in archives or as part of unpublished texts, while much more is being gathered in contemporary research. Yet, a critique to this enormous academic effort may be that analysis and interpretation of data has been left behind, to favor the ethnographic and linguistic documentation and rescue of the vanishing oral heritage of endangered native cultures. This paper discusses such analytical shortcoming and advances a dialogic perspective based on Bakhtin's theoretical framework, with particular interest in concepts derived from musical theory, such as voice, intonation, and polyphony. In fact, even though Bakhtin's interests were centered on rather canonical written literature, and not on folklore and the

aesthetic verbal creations of non Western cultures, his conceptual framework is based on oral phenomena in general, as his concept of voice clearly shows. Oral discourse and everyday language are placed as the foundation and primary source of written literature. Therefore, Bakhtinian concepts have an extraordinary potential for the study of oral discourse, in particular of tales, legends, myths, and other genres belonging to traditional narrative. In this paper I argue that linguistic anthropological research on oral tradition may greatly benefit from a Bakhtinian perspective, which offers novel conceptual tools for the understanding of ethnic narrative, and may also allow a critical review of previous theories and studies on the subject.

Resumo

A tradição oral tem uma longa história de investigação, tanto em linguística quanto em antropologia, sendo o vasto corpus da narrativa étnica uma de suas principais realizações. Esta documentação notável de todo um mundo de criações culturais verbais, até um certo ponto, já foi publicada, outros materiais permanecem em arquivos ou como parte de textos inéditos, enquanto muito mais está sendo reunido na pesquisa contemporânea. No entanto, uma crítica a este enorme esforço acadêmico pode ser que a análise e interpretação dos dados foram deixadas para trás, para favorecer a documentação etnográfica e linguística e resgate do patrimônio oral evanescente de culturas nativas ameaçadas de extinção. Este artigo discute a deficiência analítica de tais avanços e uma perspectiva dialógica com base no quadro teórico de Bakhtin, com particular interesse em conceitos derivados da teoria musical, tais como voz, entonação e polifonia. Na verdade, apesar de que os interesses de Bakhtin foram centrados na literatura canônica escrita, e não sobre o folclore e as criações estéticas verbais de culturas não-ocidentais, a sua estrutura conceitual é baseada em fenômenos orais em geral, como seu conceito de voz mostra claramente. Discurso oral e linguagem cotidiana são colocados como a base e fonte primária da literatura escrita. Portanto, os conceitos bakhtinianos têm um potencial extraordinário para o estudo do discurso oral, em particular dos contos, lendas, mitos, e outros gêneros pertencentes à narrativa tradicional. Neste artigo argumenta-se que a pesquisa antropológica linguística na tradição oral pode se beneficiar muito de uma perspectiva bakhtiniana, que oferece novas ferramentas conceituais para a compreensão da narrativa étnica, e também pode permitir uma revisão crítica das teorias e estudos prévios sobre o assunto.

Entradas para indexação

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: dialogismo, etnolingüística, tradição oral

KEYWORDS: dialogism, ethnolinguistics, folklore, oral tradition

La necesidad filológica generó la lingüística, meció su cuna y dejó su flauta filológica en los pañales. Esta flauta está destinada a despertar a los muertos. Pero le faltan sonidos apropiados para dominar un lenguaje vivo en su generación continua.

Music is a specific aspect of (the artistic sphere of) social discourse

Pierrette Malczynski (1999:98)

[I would like to dedicate my paper to the memory of Pierrette, Friend and bakhtinian scholar who inspired this work]

The study of Oral tradition has a long standing in linguistics and anthropology, where it has been regarded as a rich source of data for the analysis of language and culture. This is so because scholars have identified oral tradition as a verbal depository of ingrained culture, and as the most ancient vehicle for its transmission¹. Throughout time, a vast corpus of oral traditional narrative has been gathered from cultures all over the world, some of them endangered or even disappeared. Myths, legends, tales and songs are among the most prominent genres of oral literatures recorded through ethnolinguistic research, although the amount of genres is in fact unaccountable, as it is the amount of spheres of praxis to which they belong, to put it in Bakhtinian terms.

Recorded texts from oral tradition have been employed for a variety of purposes, and approached from diverse theoretical perspectives. Let us recall the folklore studies of the Grimm brothers, the works of James Frazer on magic and religion, Propp's morphology of fairy tales, or Levi-Strauss's structural study of mythology, just to evoke some classic works on the subject. Contemporary linguistics and anthropology maintain a research interest on oral tradition, both as a key to cultural knowledge, and as a contribution to the preservation of "cultural jewels" in an era of radical changes.

But besides the goals of scientific research, oral traditions have also nurtured all sorts of artistic creations all over the world, in a movement that goes from the spoken word to its graphic and plastic representations. This is an ancient phenomena, revolutionized by the invention of writing, that produced a displacement of oral communication, evident in the role taken by written literature, although one could say that a second movement is taking place in our contemporary world, a shift back to the “oral” made possible thanks to technological developments, such as McLuhan (1962, 1964), foresaw half a century ago.

The problem however is that much of the research on oral tradition has centered on the recording and translation of the verbal texts, leaving behind the analytical and interpretive tasks involved in the cultural phenomena *as a whole*. Often, such recordings have been done without paying much attention to the complex of contextual aspects involved in oral discourse, which as Voloshinov (1997) has shown are of fundamental importance. This leads to the recognition that the lack of systematic documentation of contexts, which include the situational ones, but also those belonging to the Bakhtinian “great time”, such as the “cultural perceptive background”, deprives oral traditional narrative of fundamental data for its comprehensive understanding². Intonation, pauses, gestures, specific moments, participants, but also the implicit “givens”, which include the cultural enthymemes involved in the telling of a story must be taken into account and “connected” to the verbal utterance in order to “get the message” in the sense intended by the native speakers. Thus, anthropology faces a strong challenge on this field, for although it counts with an enormous corpus of texts already recorded and published, and with the possibility to register the oral traditions of living cultures the world over, the discipline is in need of theoretic and methodological perspectives that allow for a deep understanding of the cultural meanings of traditional verbal creations.

One of the question that arises here is what to do with the texts belonging to distant places and times, already published but that miss those contextual elements, the obvious, the given? The problem is especially relevant if we consider

with Bakhtin and Voloshinov that such enthymemes are the most important aspects for the understanding of culture, all that which is shared by the cultural community, those shared social values and ideas that “go by without saying”. Another question has to do with the heuristic position that researchers may play in their relation to the other culture, in the possibilities of asking questions not posed or thought about by previous researchers, nor by the members of the culture itself. And here we have to recognize from the start the obstacles involved, the distances between “us” and “them”, and take as a premise the fact that “we” do not really understand what those foreign voices wanted to say. Following Bakhtin we need to count on our side with an emphatic competence to be able to get into the culture and “see the world from that point of view”, but we must as well realize the fundamental importance of our external condition, the exotopic vision, and what it has to provide as a surplus of vision to the understanding of culture. In other words, the challenge is to build up a dialogue with the other culture, and as Malcuzyński (1999) has pointed out, we need to search for other means of understanding, other ways to “listen” to the other, including here the competence to understand the meaning of silence, rhythm and intonation of those foreign voices.

In the following pages I shall explore some of Bakhtin’s ideas related to the voice and oral discourse that may provide answers to those questions and shed new lights on our field of study.

On voice and music

Musical theory was a very important source of Bakhtin’s philosophical and theoretical thought³, so as to be considered a foundation of his philosophy of language. In her excellent study on the subject, Malcuzyński remarks the clear influence of musicology in Bakhtin’s conception of language, but also points out to the lack of attention the issue has been given among researchers. She emphasizes

the strong influence of musicians and scholars such as Voloshinov, Yudina, Sollertinsky and Asafiev, the latter a musical historian, composer and theorist who defined intonation as the basic musical sign, and as a social component of meaning in music, an idea that is very close to the concept of intonation in Bakhtin (Malcuzyński, 1999:95).

In fact, Malcuzyński shows the profusion of terms and musical notions in the theoretical framework of Bakhtin, such as intonation, voice, accentuation, rhythm, counterpoint, and polyphony, which according to her, are rightly incorporated into the philosopher's thought, "from the perspective of music, and not in a rhetorical transposition to another non-musical language" (Ibid. 105), that is, as a dialogic encounter between musicology and Bakhtin's poetics, where both perspectives are enriched but maintain their own specificity, as it happens with "an encounter between two cultures on equal basis, or two artistic manifestations that may not be completely foreign to each other but nonetheless are semiotically radically different" (Ibid. 102) . Thus, Malcuzyński considers that "the sphere of music is conceivably one of the most significant aesthetic realities in Bakhtin's theoretical and conceptual thinking. In this sense, music is undoubtedly as central to his philosophy of poetics as carnival is to his conception of genre and the history of the novel" (Ibid. 97).

According to her more than a metaphor polyphony is an analytical and axiological concept that traverses the whole work of the philosopher, as conceptual connections between polyphony and dialogism show. In this sense, she refers to Bakhtin's view of the need of a systematic general aesthetic orientation "for the unity of art –as a domain of unified human culture", as well as the observation that "contrapuntual relationships in music are only a musical variety of the more broadly understood concept of dialogic relationships" (Bakhtin quotes in Malcuzyński 1999:97)

These considerations lead Malcuzyński to the conclusion that "music is a specific aspect of (the artistic sphere of) social discourse, taken in a wide sense of the term ... social discourse is not only made up of speech and written words –by

extension printed linguistic material- but also of images and iconic materials, of rituals, of sound and sonic phenomena of diverse nature, of mimics, gestures and body language in general and wherever pertinent” (Ibid 98).

Banal in itself, the distinction between “hearing” and “listening” is nonetheless fundamental, for within a given enunciative instance, it enables us to establish the internal modalities of tension referring to evaluating the *position* of enunciation, not the enunciated or utterance alone. This process of evaluation is what Bakhtin/Voloshinov analyzes in his early works in terms of intonation and accentuation; that is, *the axiological coloration of the verbal totality, the expressive timbre or tone of the word, the sonority of the voice or vocal resonance*. And it is precisely this Bakhtinian understanding of intonation as the socially evaluative dimension of literary discourse that, in his later work, Asafiev appears to have transferred quite literally to musical discourse, when he describes music as “the art of intonated sense” Malcuzyński (1999:106) [italics are mine].

Another important conclusion Malcuzyński derives from her analysis is that if music is permeated by social values expressed through intonation, then the contents and musical forms will necessarily have ethical contents. Artistic creation turns out to be then an ethic-aesthetic event. Clearly, this is related to Bakhtin’s conception of language understood as a communicative, ethical act: “to be means to communicate dialogically”.

On her study on Bakhtin’s dialogic conception of the voice, Bubnova (2006)⁴ also remarks the importance of musical theory in Bakhtin, pointing out to the contribution of Malcuzyński on the subject. The voice, she says, bears a fundamental function in human communication, and ought to be understood as a metaphor of “the socio.semantic memory deposited in the word” (2006:100). Another important metaphor Bubnova identifies in the dialogic conception of Bakhtin is polyphony, which provides an accountability of the diversity of voices with which the speaker establishes a dialogue in the real world. “In its relation to dialogue, polyphony refers to the orchestration of voices in open dialogue, without solution ...Music is also a language” (Ibid.107). Bubnova also mentions the

importance of silence and enthymemes in the translinguistic theory of Bakhtin: “the territory of the utterance understood as communication covers not only what is said explicitly, but also the sphere of meaningful silence, the implicit givens, the unsaid, what cannot be said, the ineffable” (Ibid. 105).

Bubnova observes that even though Bakhtin main concerns were the rather canonical written literature, and not folklore and oral tradition, oral phenomena does have a fundamental place in his philosophy of language and aesthetic theory. His dialogic conception of the spoken word allows him an understanding of writing as an expansion of the former, and not as opposing and contrasting domains. “Writing is nothing but the codified transcription of voices”, Bubnova states (Ibid.)

In the world of Bakhtin, writing does not get a main standing in itself, but just as a resource capable of translating the human voice, as the carrier of existential meanings, preserving in a specific manner its modalities that he characterizes through metaphors related to the voice and music: polyphony, counterpoint, double-voiced word, chorus, tonality, intonation, accent, etc. (Bubnova 2006:100-101)

Therefore voice understood as a communicative act cannot be reduced to its linguistic forms, to its textual structure or to its semiotic codes, for it is a dialogic act that involves the verbal text with different levels of contexts, it is always an utterance that responds to previous utterances, and that anticipates further responses. The meaning of an utterance cannot be limited to form and content of its verbal expression, and it is for this reason that Bakhtin proposes the utterance as the basic unity of translinguistic analysis, a unity that includes text in contexts, that is, the verbal expression and its extraverbal components, including here the intonational background. The utterance must be understood dialogically, as a speech act and as a social relation, a relation between I and the other that crosses the cognitive, ethic and aesthetic levels. Translinguistics, Bubnova says, ought to be “a linguistics that advances further than the analysis of formal elements of language, towards the dialogic relations that are the very meaning of

communication” (2006:112). She states that the voice understood as an utterance is a responsible, countersigned act, it is a personalized voice that always comes from someone, expresses the point of view of a person in the world. The voice as the primary form of human communication is fundamentally oral, and it is from the oral that other communicational systems, such as writing, are constructed.

The world thought by him [Bakhtin] both the written and the oral, appears unified by the dynamic production of meanings, generated and transmitted by personalized voices, representing ethic and ideological positions, differentiated in a conjunction and intercourse with the other voices (Bubnova 2006:100).

Conclusion

The meaning of the emotional and evaluative expressions in the discursive life of people. But the expression of emotional and evaluative relations can have a non explicit verbal character, but a character implicit in intonation. The most important and stable intonations conform an intonational background belonging to a determined social group (nation, class, professional collectivity, circle, etc.)

Bakhtin (1982:388)

Through this brief analysis we have approached a particular conception of Bakhtin that is of extraordinary interest to the study of oral tradition: the musical background of his philosophy of language, and the musical element of the human voice. Here intonation is taken as the sound component of the word capable of transmitting emotional and volitional aspects, but also as something much more comprehensive in a cultural sense, as the distinctive way people talks, as the particular accent belonging to each social and cultural group, as the subtle musicality expressed in each language, in each social dialect. Moreover, Bakhtin observes the existence of an intonational background of meaning, understood as an extratextual corpus of meaning available to the members of a community of

speech. Such intonational background consists not only of a repertoire of tonalities impregnated of values from which the voice feeds constantly, but exists also as a socio semiotic environment in which the perception of the voice takes place. He exemplifies this point considering the reception of a work of art:

The text, be it printed, written or oral=transcribed is not equal to the work [of art] as a totality (or to the “aesthetic object”). The needed extratextual context forms part of the work. The work appears wrapped up in *the intonational and evaluative music of the context* in which it is understood and evaluated (of course, such a context changes according to the epochs of perception, creating a new expression of the work) (1982:389) [italics are mine]

Therefore, it becomes clear that our philosopher was well aware of the complex musical dimensions inherent in the human language, and of the need of a broad discipline for the study of such complexity. We can now return to Malcuzyński’s remark about music as a specific aspect of social discourse, and ask ourselves of what music are we talking about? What is the musical aspect of intonation, and what lights could it shed on our study of oral tradition? Here we may recall the particular “singing” of the voice, so often mentioned when referring to the “funny” ways other people speaks a language, or to the particular “accent” of a speech community considered as a musical aspect of the voice, of oral discourse. This would lead us to questions such as the social and cultural values involved in the tonality of the voice, and to ask how a people’s accent works as a linguistic aspect of ethnic identity, or to enquire about the latent meanings of cultural enthymemes, having in mind Bakhtin’ observation that all utterances shall live their moment of resurrection.

In terms of methodology we need to recognize that implicit givens are always included in our “hearing” of foreign voices, but the problem here is that those may be our own givens, and not theirs. Therefore a competence is needed to really “listen” to the foreign voices under study, and be able to distinguish the meanings of its own “music”. And that is not a matter of simply recording the “pitch” of the

voice, but rather to be able to recognize the “cultural perceptive background” that surrounds the utterance itself.

From this perspective, oral tradition becomes an important field of study, for the theoretical questions it poses, and for the novel possibilities to the understanding of culture it offers. Such perspective ought to search for the implicit givens in oral texts, and for the subtle meanings carried in intonation, in its music, and ought to listen to the polyphony of voices in which texts are interwoven. In other words, the challenge is to establish a dialogic communication with oral tradition, to listen to what it has to tell us, and to ask its voices questions not formulated before. I can foresee that from such a dialogue we shall get unexpected responses, responses that even though fragmentary, may get us closer to the meanings those voices once had, and to the meanings those same voices may have for us now. In brief, a dialogic perspective on oral tradition marks a shift that goes from the study of texts to the study of voices, and in that movement we shall have to take into account the broad scope of Bakhtin’s legacy.

Notas

¹ See Alejos García 2001, Foley 1991, Hymes 1994, Niles 1999, Zumthor 1991.

² See Alejos García 2009, Bauman 1986, W. Foley 1997, Haviland and Flores Farfán 2007.

³ See Bubnova 2006, Cassotti 2010, Malcuzyński 1999, Wall 1984.

⁴ The following quotations to Bubnova and Bakhtin are my own translations of the Spanish editions.

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