

BAKHTINIAN PERSPECTIVES : DISCOURSE AND IDENTITY

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This paper focuses on a speech I recorded from the Sky News television channel in 2000 showing Ms. Betty Boothroyd, then Speaker of the House of Commons in Britain, engaged in her farewell speech to Parliament just before she retired from this institutional position. The last few minutes of Boothroyd's speech are analysed through the lens of Bakhtinian reasonings related to identity. I therefore explore how discourse contributes to the ongoing construction of identity of the principal participant, and how social constructs such as institutional power and control are preserved and reinforced by both agency and social role. Within a post-structuralist and a social constructionist conceptualization of subjectivity, this paper envisages a dynamic relationship between the communicative event and the context which generates it.

KEYWORDS: discourse, subjectivity, post-structuralist, social constructionist

1 INTRODUCTION

Maybin (2003) asserts that central to Bakhtin (1984) and Volosinov's (1986) work is the idea that language is never neutral, and always reflects a particular evaluative position or moral perspective. In addition, Bakhtin (1981) conceptualises language as dialogic, in the sense that specific uses of language or 'utterances' contribute dynamically to meaning-making since they are embedded in sociocultural and historical contexts. Importantly, language is looked at as a site of struggle envisaging individuals engaged in creating a sense of themselves (and hence, their identity) against dominant forms of institutional expectations. These crucial understandings converge with the main tenets proposed by Critical Discourse Analysts (cf. Fairclough,1995; Kress and van Leeuwen,1996) who examine the ideological bases of texts and their uses as media for political or social control, and the maintenance of power structures (Fairclough, 1989,1992a,1995; Fowler et al.,1979; Kress,1989; Kress and Hodge,1979). In accordance with a Bakhtinian approach to text analysis, all texts are thus essentially viewed as "critical sites for the negotiation of power and ideology." (Burns, 2001). This conceptual framework will be used as an instrument for a microethnographic analysis of the last three minutes of an official speech (recorded on video) delivered by Betty Boothroyd, who had been elected as the first woman Speaker at the House of Commons in the United Kingdom in 1992 and is now engaged in the delivery of an official 'farewell' speech to Parliament, prior to her retirement in Autumn 2000. The extract offers an interesting text for a Bakhtinian analysis of talk which explores how

discourse contributes to the ongoing construction of this participant's identity, taking into account her negotiation of the centripetal and centrifugal dynamics present in the particular, highly ritualised community of practice under focus in this paper : the Members of the House of Commons in Britain. This research reveals how the particular subjectivity of the Speaker progressively emerges within the opportunities and constraints inherent in her institutional role, as she receives constant feedback from the other participants in the community. In addition, the paper explores how social constructs such as institutional power and control are preserved and reinforced by both agency and social role of the main participant. Framed within social constructionist and post-structuralist conceptualizations of identity, this exploration therefore envisages a dynamic relationship between the communicative event and particular aspects of the context which generate it (Goodman et al, 2003).

The above reasonings have strong affinities with systemic functional linguists' views and analysis of language as can be seen for instance, in Coffin's (2001) remarks on how Systemic Functional Linguistics, unlike many theories of language, asks questions that :

traditionally would be seen as belonging to the domains of sociology and anthropology such as "What is the role of language in creating social identity?", "How is language used for the purposes of propaganda?", "How do the 'below the surface' patterns of grammar construct particular ideologies?" (Coffin 2001:95)

Coffin also comments on how systemic functional linguists view language as a large network of interrelated options from which speakers unconsciously select when speaking. To some extent therefore, the analytic methods used in this research draw on Systemic Functional Grammar, especially within the Tenor variable which is particularly significant here, in that it accounts for "the role relationships between interactants found in Interpersonal meanings expressed through Mood, attitudinal and modality choices" (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006:217). The paper also draws on a variety of qualitative, ethnographic approaches, prevalently on Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology.

The following is the text of the three-minute recording focused in the analysis :

Transcription Conventions

In margin :

S Speaker, Ms Betty Boothroyd, MP

MPs Members of Parliament

In text :

Italicized words enclosed in parentheses indicate my comments on contextual or other features.

Alternatively, they may indicate a non-verbal activity. For example (*energetic nod*)

! Exclamation marks are used to indicate an animated or emphatic tone.

(.) Brief pause

(...) Long pause

bold Word(s) given particular emphasis by the speaker.

The intensity of the MPs' cheers is reflected in the number of 'Hear!' exclamations

Extract from Boothroyd's speech (last three minutes)

- 1 **S** It is in Parliament in the first instance that ministers **must explain** (.)
2 and justify their policies.
- 3 **S** And since becoming speaker in 1992, I have made my views known
4 about this (.) both publicly and behind the scenes to both governments.
- 5 **S** And I **have taken action** to ensure that those (.) who advise ministers, should never
6 overlook (.) the primacy (.) of Parliament. (.)
- 7 **S** This is the chief forum of the nation, **today, tomorrow** (.) and **I hope forever!**
- 8 **MPs** Yea! Hear! Hear! (*applause*)
- 9 **S** Now (.) Question Time offers a prime opportunity (.) **to hold ministers to account,**
10 and **I share the disappointment** (.) at the slow progress that is being made (.)
- 11 Too many back-bench members are being deprived of their chance (.) to question
12 ministers (.) by the long-windedness of colleagues (...)
- 13 **MPs** Yea! Yea!
- 14 **S** We are not moving down the Order Paper **as we should.**

15 **S** But there is also an issue of quality as well as quantity (.) and there is from time to
16 time, **a risk** that (.) engagement with the real issues is seen to be overshadowed
17 by (.) **political point-scoring** (.) simply **for its own sake!**

18 **S** Now, Parliament's other prime function is the scrutiny (.) of government
19 legislation. And there is I believe throughout the House **a general recognition** (.)
20 that this is an area (.) ripe for improvement.

21 **S** Committees of the House as well as outside bodies (.) are making a substantial
22 contribution to (.) the debate (.) and the issues are serious and are complex, and
23 there is no simple solution.

24 **S** The debate should not be conducted however on (.) party lines (.) nor on the
25 simplistic basis of the executive versus the rest of us.

26 **S** I(.)furthermore the House must be prepared (.) **to put in the hours necessary** (.) to
27 carry out effective examination (.) of the government's legislative work.
28 And now (.) if this means long days (.) or rearrangement of the parliamentary
29 years (.) so be it! (...)

30 **S** Of course, I'm the (.) I've been here long enough (.) I may (...) I recognise the
31 importance of enabling parliamentarians to enjoy a domestic life (.)
32 and it shouldn't be (.) impossible to meet both objectives, but where, there is (.)
33 may be a clash (.) the requirements of effective scrutiny, then the democratic
34 process **must take priority over the convenience of members!** (*Energetic nod*).

35 **S** (*Looks up and around with a smile*): Rejoice, rejoice in your inheritance!
36 And defend your rights! And remember always that the priveleges this House
37 enjoys were dearly won (.) and **must never be squandered!**

38 **MPs** YEA! YEA! HEAR! HEAR! HEAR!

39 **S** Now you elected me in the springtime (.) and I shall retire in the autumn.
40 I think it is a very fitting seasonal conclusion to my period office.
41 And therefore **I say to all of you** (.) in a phrase you know so well, but has never
42 been so true (.) **Time's up!** (*Nods head visibly downwards and upwards as she says this*).
(General, loud laughter, long applause lasting 10 seconds).

(Sky News Television)

2 ANALYSIS

I will now analyse lines from the speech, in terms of the perspectives exposed in the introduction.

- 1 **S** It is in Parliament in the first instance that ministers **must explain** (.)
2 and justify their policies.

The power which ministers hold within their role as policy-makers, is strategically scaled down by the speaker : the root modal ‘must’ acts as auxiliary to the process ‘explain’ and is here used in its strongest form, emphasizing the speaker’s authority and automatically, as it were, shifting the ministers’ position into a subalternate one. In fact, Boothroyd’s choice of both the wording and the words (for e.g. ‘explain’, ‘justify’), positions the ministers as policy proposers rather than as autonomous policy-makers. Bakhtin’s notion of the dynamic tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces manifests itself in the language here, as the Speaker struggles to realign the ministers’ attitudes by subordinating their role to the authority of Parliament as the supreme representative of British citizens.

- 3 **S** and since becoming speaker in 1992, I have made my views known
4 about this (.) both publicly and behind the scenes to both governments.

According to Bakhtin (1981) the shape and meaning of an utterance is dialogically oriented in two directions: towards the past and towards the future. Boothroyd strategically goes back to the year of her investiture as Speaker to claim with conviction how she has constantly been keeping the ministers’ initiatives under her firm control with the objective of ‘shaping’ ministers’ attitudes and actions in order to ensure positive, ‘democratic’ outcomes. The Declarative mood in the phrase “I have made my views known” places this speaker in a position of power, affirming her subjectivity as a strong-willed, dauntless individual who has the courage to fulfil this difficult role in full transparency. Her language is coherent with her task and her institutional role and status, which is that of controlling the subtle equilibrium of power between the public at large and the powers that be.

- 5 **S** And **I have taken action** to ensure that those (.) who advise ministers, should never
6 overlook (.) the primacy (.) of Parliament. (.)

Drawing on Bakhtin’s notions, Goodman et al. (2002) underline how centrifugal impulses tend to lead to the fragmentation of cultural and political institutions, while centripetal forces produce authoritative discourses which are relatively fixed and inflexible in meaning. From this perspective, Boothroyd’s discourse here explicitly represents institutional authority and her language reflects Bakhtin’s description of the nature of centripetal pressures as unbending and rigorous, usually associated with political centralization and a unified cultural ‘canon’. The centrifugal dynamics which interpenetrate centripetal forces are associated with what Bakhtin calls “inwardly persuasive discourse” which leads to the diversification of language (ibid.). With

another declarative Mood choice : “I have taken action to ensure” the Speaker emphasizes her determination as a doer : any attempts made by her subordinates and any ‘external’ advisers to disregard what she describes as the supreme authority of the House have been persistently checked as these advisers have always been brought to book whenever attempts at bypassing Parliament were made. The Speaker is here reconstructing aspects of her social identity as a major institutional figure whose duty is to safeguard Parliament’s dominance over any individual forms of defiance : the modal ‘should’ followed by ‘never’ here expresses powerful admonition rather than a mere recommendation.

The implications which this particular discourse has resonate with Bucholtz’s (2003) assumptions which draw on Bakhtin’s concepts. Bucholtz affirms that a community of practice expects difference and conflict, rather than uniformity and consensus, to be the ordinary state of affairs within the community. As Boothroyd underlines that Parliament should always have the last word over any argument, she is constructing a powerful ‘voice’ or ideological position within the struggle between the centripetal and centrifugal tensions which permeate this community.

7 **S** This is the chief forum of the nation, **today, tomorrow** (.) and **I hope forever!**
8 **MPs** Yea! Hear! Hear! (*applause*)

The participants’ applause reflects the impact which the Speaker’s oratorical skills and authority has over this audience. Boothroyd’s words “Today, tomorrow and forever” is an example of the three-part list technique which makes a point in three related parts. (Mercer 2000:74). Mercer observes how this technique is widely used by politicians, evangelical preachers, salespeople and other charismatic persuaders in many parts of the world. The researcher Max Atkinson first identified the three-part list in recordings of political speeches to see when applause occurred, and how enthusiastic it was. The conversation analyst Robin Wooffitt claims that three-part lists :

are successful at eliciting applause because they project their own completion; as they are being built, they signal when they are going to end.

Wooffitt (in Mercer, 2000:75)

9 **S** Now (.) Question Time offers a prime opportunity (.) **to hold ministers to account,**
10 **and I share the disappointment** (.) at the slow progress that is being made (.)
11 Too many back-bench members are being deprived of their chance (.) to question
12 ministers (.) by the long-windedness of colleagues (...)
13 **MPs** Yea! Yea!

Boothroyd instils an air of sureness here as every statement occurs in the simple or continuous present tense without any modalizing elements. The participant ‘P’ followed by the process ‘share’ in the phrase “I share the disappointment”, subtly and strategically supports Boothroyd’s disapproval of some ministers’ ‘mobbing’ behaviour as they ‘steal’ the back benchers’ right to speak during question time. “I share the disappointment” is a phrase which plays up the convergence of Boothroyd’s own opinions with that of ‘others’, reinforcing it in the process. The Speaker constantly negotiates her own individual identity as judge, controller and leader of this community

of practice and at this point, also feels the need to renegotiate the role of the back benchers who she feels have the duty and the right to challenge and restrain the ministers' excessive dominance during Question Time in parliament. Back benchers play an important role in opposing and neutralizing ministers' wills and privileges, and Boothroyd's unyielding tone during the defence of back benchers' rights reveals strong personal feelings. In this male-dominated community, the participant's agency emerges forcefully, as she negotiates her individual identity vis-à-vis that of this large group of influential politicians.

14 S We are not moving down the Order Paper **as we should**.

Boothroyd's stern tone of voice reinforces the use of the modal 'should' which not only objectively expresses the "correct procedure to follow", but is also at the strong end of its scale of meaning, and here has the force of moral obligation or duty. (Falinsky,1990:302). The inclusive participant 'we' and directive modal 'should' reasserts the group identity of this particular community, and also promotes Boothroyd's role as its undisputed umpire.

15 S But there is also an issue of quality as well as quantity (.) and there is from time to
16 time, **a risk** that (.) engagement with the real issues is seen to be overshadowed
17 by (.) **political point-scoring** (.) simply **for its own sake!**

Boothroyd is now attacking the contents of the ministers' speeches, particularly their promotion of party interests at the expense of dealing with real issues for the citizens' benefit. What emerges in this is Bakhtin's perspective on language as a site for power struggles between different groups in the community. Here we have another example of how Bakhtin describes centripetal forces as interpenetrated by centrifugal dynamics which if unchecked, might lead to the fragmentation of cultural and political institutions. (Goodman et al. (2002). In addition, Bakhtin describes "finding one's voice" as implying the assumption of a particular ideological position. Boothroyd's ideological stance emerges in these lines, as she clearly condemns what she judges to be the unethical practice of ministers who promote party or self-interest. It is interesting to note how in these lines, all the participants used do not refer to people, but to people's actions, as in the phrases 'engagement with the real issues' and 'political point-scoring'.

18 S Now, Parliament's other prime function is the scrutiny (.) of government
19 legislation. And there is I believe throughout the House **a general recognition** (.)
20 that this is an area (.) ripe for improvement.

Boothroyd again stresses convergence of her views with those of others when she affirms that "there is a general recognition throughout the House" concerning the need to improve Parliament's scrutiny of government legislation. This utterance associates her status, identity and expertise as a vigilant expert in this community, with that of other 'watchful' members, and therefore strategically reinforces her criticism of the inadequacy of the ministers' performance in this particular task.

21 S Committees of the House as well as outside bodies (.) are making a substantial
22 contribution to (.) the debate (.) and the issues are serious and are complex, and
23 there is no simple solution.

Bakhtin metaphorically describes the dialogic nature of language as a “chain of communication” (1981,1986). In fact, the position of Boothroyd’s critique refers to past events, but is also “shaped in anticipation of its own possible responses in the future” (Goodman et al, 2003), as will be seen in later comments in her speech whereby she strongly proposes indications to solve this delicate problem.

25 S The debate should not be conducted however on (.) party lines (.) nor on the
26 simplistic basis of the executive versus the rest of us.

Boothroyd’s warning against any division between “the executive versus the rest of us”, the latter including herself, is coherent with previous instances of self-inclusion in this group. This phrase is significant, since self-exclusion and isolation from the ‘group’ could undermine her authority and create further division.

26 S I (.)furthermore the House must be prepared (.) **to put in the hours necessary** (.) to
27 carry out effective examination (.) of the government’s legislative work.
28 And now (.) if this means long days (.) or rearrangement of the parliamentary years
29 (.) so be it! (...)

The time dedicated to examining government’s legislative work appears to be an extremely delicate, thorny issue and both in terms of discourse and of body language, Boothroyd now appears rather hesitant as she tackles this argument. The institutional obligation which the House has concerning “effective examination of the government’s legislative work” is initially driven by the modal element ‘must’ in line 26, soon to be transformed however, into ‘fact’ through the powerful, assertive phrase: “so be it!”. This declaration highlights Boothroyd’s unquestionable command and control as a leader of this community, compatible with the unchallengeable power which her role as Speaker grants her.

30 S Of course, I’m the (.) I’ve been here long enough (.) I may (...) I recognise the
31 importance of enabling parliamentarians to enjoy a domestic life (.)
32 and it shouldn’t be (.) impossible to meet both objectives, but where, there is (.)
33 may be a clash (.) the requirements of effective scrutiny, and the democratic
34 process **must take priority over the convenience of members!**
(Energetic nod)

Goodman et al.(2002) observe how Bahktin’s argument for a ‘dialogical’ model of communication has strongly influenced language studies. Bakhtin considers the utterance itself as a response, explicit or implicit, to other utterances, either in the current conversation or in past discourse, insofar as specific words and phrases may invoke links with other conversations. These lines seem to provide an example in which an additional layer of intertextual connections contribute to the nuances of meanings expressed by the Speaker. Boothroyd in fact mentions what appear to be frequently recurrent clashes over the management of the ministers’ time dedicated to the requirements of effective scrutiny, as against the time dedicated to their private lives. Her numerous pauses, and rather uncertain shifts in the use of modality, particularly ‘may’ and ‘shouldn’t’, reveal her caution in dealing with this delicate issue. Nevertheless, Boothroyd’s tone and discourse, as well as body language, steadily increase assertiveness as she nods energetically and says : “the democratic process must take priority over the

convenience of members!” This enforces the speaker’s ideological convictions and marks a radical change in tone. The choice of the word ‘convenience’ tactfully reduces the ministers’ claims to dedicate more time to their private lives to what seems to be a mere egoistic indulgence!

35 **S** (*Looks up and around with a smile*) Rejoice, rejoice in your inheritance!
36 And defend your rights! And remember always that the privileges this House
37 enjoys were dearly won (.) and **must never be squandered!**
38 **MPS** Yea! Yea! Hear! Hear! Hear!

Having firmly re-established her authority, Boothroyd now opens a new psychological and affective communicative phase (line 35) : what emerges is yet another feature of this figure’s identity, complementing those aspects of her discourse which in good part till now, have invoked the rules of the institutional authority she represents. In these lines, Boothroyd repetitively uses the Imperative mood to good effect as she ardently prompts the other participants to rejoice. Bakhtin’s colleague, Volosinov (1986) affirms:

‘For each word of the utterance that we are in the process of understanding, we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words in essence, meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive, understanding it is like an electric spark that occurs only when two different terminals are hooked together.’
(Volosinov 1986)

The MP’s loud cheers at this point reflect a strong emotional response to Boothroyd’s ebullient remark concerning the privileges shared by this particular community. She stirs up a formidable sense of unity and the ‘electric spark’ occurs, manifesting itself in the members’ overwhelming response to vital shared understandings and consensus among the members of this community.

This is Boothroyd’s last speech at the House of Commons, and this is the very last stage of her speech. The views she has just expressed give a good balance to the former contents of the speech and also to the construction of Boothroyd’s subjectivity as an energetic ‘mediator’ of the centripetal and centrifugal dynamics in the community she leads. In fact, the members’ response in line 38 vastly confirm acceptance of her commands and declarations, and re-establish the Members of Parliament’s submission to the executive. A crucial balance now seems to have been re-established, relative to this community’s understandings and ground rules concerning rights and duties

39 **S** Now you elected me in the springtime (.) and I shall retire in the autumn.
40 I think it is a very fitting seasonal conclusion to my period office.
41 And therefore **I say to all of you** (.) in a phrase you know so well, but has never
42 been so true (.) **Time’s up!** (*Nods head visibly downwards and upwards as she says this*).
(*General, loud laughter, long applause lasting ten seconds*).

The emphatic, declarative phrase in line 41: “I say to all of you” yet again distinguishes Boothroyd’s assertive subjectivity vis-à-vis the others in the community, as she intentionally builds up tension and expectation in her audience. This tactical move anticipates a conclusion which holds a calculated anticlimax, and resulting piquant humour as she announces the routine phrase “Time’s up!”, which for once, she applies

to herself! The MPs' intense applause and laughter highlight Boothroyd's success and credibility. This Speaker's particular subjectivity is again distinctly perceived in her last flash of humour, and her 'joke' again provokes the 'electric spark' mentioned earlier.

3 CONCLUSION

Bakhtin's understandings have vitally contributed to gaining an insight into how this speaker negotiated and performed important aspects of her identity and status. The other participants' responses reflected how the concept of subjectivity is in fact permeated with intersubjectivity, and envisages both how one sees one's position in the world, and how one is identified by others.

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