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Inarticulateness as a developmental process from inability to ability in speech genres

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ABSTRACT

From a Bakhtinian and Vygotskian perspective, I demonstrate that there is a complex developmental process which, if not interrupted, leads from inarticulateness to articulateness in various speech genres. In order to characterize inarticulateness and its dialogic development, I first present a preliminary theoretical discussion on human language and human activity. Second, I illustrate the development of inarticulateness by focusing on its portrayal in the Hollywood movie “I love you, man.” I present a brief summary of the film plot in order to permit detailed analysis. This paper provides a contribution to the fields of (psycho) linguistics, pragmatics, discourse studies, and other related areas.

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1. Introduction

Both in the field of (psycho) linguistics and in that of pragmatics or discourse studies, inarticulateness has traditionally been defined as a kind of “problematic talk” (House et al., 2003; Coupland et al., 1991) whose main characteristic is a lack of fluency (Riggenbach, 2000) in the use of language. An inarticulate speaker is unable to communicate “at length with few pauses”, to “fill time with talk”, to produce “coherent, reasoned, and ‘semantically dense’ sentences”, to “have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts” and to be linguistically “creative and imaginative” (Fillmore, 1979, p. 93; McDermott, 1988, pp. 40–41).

In this paper, I will demonstrate that inarticulateness corresponds to a broad developmental process which, if not interrupted, leads from inability to ability in speech genres or, in other words, from generic inability (or inarticulateness) to generic ability (or articulateness). To make this demonstration, I will adopt a Bakhtinian and Vygotskian perspective to analyze the inarticulateness that is portrayed in a film, “I love you, man” (2009). I have organized the paper in three parts: 1) I present a preliminary theoretical discussion that interrelates a theory of human language and a theory of human activity; and 2) I present a brief summary of the movie plot to set the stage for its following detailed analysis in the light of the two theories; 3) I draw conclusions from the analysis about the developmental process.

2. Preliminary theoretical discussion

In this first part of the paper, mostly based on Bakhtin’s and Vygotsky’s theory of human language and activity, I will present the basic theoretical concepts that will help characterize what I mean by inarticulateness. I will first present and discuss the concept of the utterance and other related concepts, including those of speech and activity genres, by means of which a concept of inarticulateness will gradually become clear.

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2.1. Human language

When people use language, they exchange *utterances*, which can be defined as units of speech communication or as speech acts that have three major characteristics: 1) clear-cut boundaries determined by a change of speakers; 2) finalization; and 3) speaker-utterance-interlocutor relationships (Bakhtin, 1986, pp.71–84). I discuss each of them in turn.

Every utterance has boundaries: an absolute beginning and an absolute end. That is, the utterance is typically preceded by the utterances of others, to which it responds, and is followed by the responsive utterances of others, which it anticipates. These responsive utterances can manifest themselves in different ways, from the silent understanding of the interlocutor to his non-verbal execution of an action based on that understanding to a verbal response. After the end of his utterance, the speaker gives the floor to his interlocutor or allows some time for his understanding. However, the speaker can also be interrupted by the interlocutor, who may prevent the end of the utterance by means of an utterance overlap (Viollet, 1986). The prevention of the end of the speaker's utterance by the interlocutor is often linked to the problem of utterance finalization: the interlocutor, anticipating the whole of the utterance that is being built by the speaker, seizes the floor immediately in order to present his response (Bakhtin, 1986, p.71).

The second characteristic of the utterance, finalization, is intimately connected with the first, as an inner feature of the change of speakers. It is related to the fact that the speaker has said the totality of what he wished to say at a given moment, under certain conditions. When the interlocutor hears or sees that an utterance is complete, he can clearly notice the end of the utterance because it becomes possible to respond to it. Two important factors, which are intimately connected in the organic whole of the utterance, determine its finalized wholeness: 1) the speaker's speech plan; and 2) speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986, pp.76–77).

Corresponding to a verbalized idea or intention, in close connection with the conditions of speech communication and its preceding utterances, the speaker's speech plan determines the length and boundaries of the utterance as well as the choice of its object (or referent). It also determines the "choice of a generic form in which the utterance will be constructed" (Bakhtin, 1986, p.77). That is why the speaker's speech plan can be embraced, understood and sensed by the interlocutor in any utterance because he imagines to himself what the speaker wants to say as the speaker begins to say it. This makes it possible for the interlocutor to measure the finalization of the utterance, once he shares with the speaker the same conditions of speech communication. That is why the interlocutor can grasp without difficulty or delay the speaker's intent or speech goals, thereby identifying from the beginning the whole of the utterance even while it is still under construction, in its gradual unfolding (Bakhtin, 1986, pp.77–78). This is one of the primary conditions for utterance overlaps to occur.

The other factor of utterance finalization, speech genres, is particularly important for the main purpose of this article. They correspond to *relatively stable* typical and normative forms of construction of utterances given to the speaker in almost the same way as his native language: by hearing and reproducing concrete utterances in actual everyday communication with people. In this sense, examples of speech genres that will be particularly important for our analysis are the ones found in conversations between real estate agents and prospective customers. These are different, for instance, from those found in conversations between people who are just friends. To learn to speak in communicative situations such as these means to learn to construct utterances according to specific speech genres. This is so because "we speak in utterances and not in individual sentences, and, of course, not in individual words". Moreover, this is so because each utterance should be built according to a genre, for the speaker's speech plan itself "is manifested only in its choice of a particular genre" (Bakhtin, 1986, pp.78–79).

Therefore, human dialog involves *repetition* of utterances previously produced by others or by the speakers themselves (this is the side of utterance and genre stability) and the simultaneous and inseparable *re-creation* of these same utterances to appropriately adapt them to ever-changing communicative circumstances. (This is, in turn, the side of relativity of utterance and genre stability; Bakhtin, 1984, p.106; Lima, 2010, 2013; 2014). *Repetition* and *re-creation* of utterances according to certain speech genres constitute a double, but at the same time unified continuous interactional and dialogic process. This means that speakers continuously learn from one another and so gradually move from silence, helplessness and awkwardness in social conversations to more or less free and creative use of genres.

This also means that, from the inability to the ability to "command a repertoire of genres of social conversation", from the lack of to the effective possession of "a sufficient supply of those ideas about the whole of the utterance that help to cast one's speech quickly and naturally in certain compositional and stylistic forms", in a word, from the inability to the ability to "grasp a word promptly, to begin and end [an utterance] correctly" (Bakhtin, 1986, p.80), there is a developmental *continuum* that deserves to be studied. I am referring to a social, cultural and historical developmental process that goes from generic inability (or *inarticulateness*) to generic ability (or *articulateness*).

Utterances, and the inarticulateness manifested as they are produced, should therefore be studied from the point of view of speech genres and these, in their turn, should be studied according to their four *inseparable* elements, which are closely related to the third major characteristic of the utterance: 1) architectonics; 2) compositional structure; 3) thematic content; and 4) style. The architectonics of speech communication consist in the triadic relationship between the speaker, the interlocutor and the object of the utterance. For any utterance to be produced, there has to be some form of interaction between at least two socially organized human beings: the speaker and his interlocutor(s). This means that, as they interact, each of them will play a specific social role in relation to the other. This is the interlocutive relationship. As the speaker interacts with his interlocutor(s), he also enters into special relationships with the object (or referent) of his utterance and other utterances that have approached the same object: the speaker's relationship to his interlocutor(s) and to his (or their)

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