

Dialogue at the Margins, Whorf, Bakhtin, and Linguistic Relativity

Emily A. Schultz

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Emily Schultz argues persuasively that Benjamin Lee Whorf attempted to provide an alternative to the relativistic view that language determines thought, and the positivistic view that there is a single, unitary Truth. Whorf's alternative, according to Schultz, is more-or-less identical to the concept of "dialogic objectivity" elaborated by the early Soviet literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin—viz., "... voluntary assent to a unified truth which includes the partial truths of each point of view, but is greater than any of them taken by itself" (p. 145). Bakhtin discovered such dialogic objectivity in the novels of Dostoevsky, which combined heteroglossia (the coexistence of many varieties of a language) and polyglossia (the coexistence of different languages) to simultaneously present different socio-ideological points of view which were present in 19th-century Russian capitalist society.

Whorf's works, like Dostoevsky's, "polyphonically" combined heteroglossia and polyglossia insofar as Whorf sought to use forms of discourse understandable to positivistically-oriented readers as well as readers with a religious or mystical orientation, in order to show to advantage the different ontological and epistemological concepts inherent in the grammar of aboriginal languages such as Hopi and Shawnee. Schultz's treatment of Whorf's discourse is masterful, especially her chapter on his "non-verbal rhetoric" (i.e., diagrams). Her discussion of Whorf's treatment of temporality in Hopi grammar is also excellent (pp. 114-115).

Although Schultz mentions Bakhtin's discussion of the absence of developing contradictions in Dostoevsky's novels (p. 123), she does not explore Marxist or dialectical materialist elements in Bakhtin's discourse. She claims that Bakhtin's discourse was framed in such a way as to evade Soviet censorship.

Like other post-structuralists, Schultz presents an unrealistic caricature of "positivistic" scientists as unremitting adversaries of dialogic objectivity. If most scientists were as pig-headedly positivistic as Schultz maintains, the dialectical processes which characterize scientific discovery would not be possible.