

Dialogic Relation between Cultures

Wassila MOURO, Université Abou Bakr Belkaid, Tlemcen

Abstract

La littérature est l'interprétation de la société par les écrivains. Ces auteurs sont influencés par d'autres écrits de sociétés, ou même, de cultures différentes ; c'est ce que Bakhtin appelle dialogisme (1981). Les écrivains représentent leurs sociétés selon leurs propres visions des choses, ce qui veut dire que la relation entre représentation et culture est telle que si les écrivains sont d'une même culture ils représenteront leur sociétés plus ou moins de la même façon, mais si un groupe est représenté différemment d'un autre on a à faire à une culture différente ; Edward Saïd décrit la représentation comme étant une restructure subjective de la réalité (1995: 129).

Comme enseignants d'une langue étrangère, on doit essayer de confronter nos étudiants à eux même et à l'autre (qui est dans ce cas la culture du pays de la langue étudiée), car des gens pensent que si ils sont en contact avec une autre culture qui est complètement différente de la leur ils seraient acculturés, ce qui n'est pas vrais puisqu'il va y avoir un processus d'interculturalisation ; ce que Claire Kramsch a nommé la troisième culture (2000).

Literature is the interpretation of the society by writers. Some are influenced by others from the same or even different societies and thus from other cultures. This influence of authors on others is dealt with by Mikhail Bakhtin and he calls it 'Dialogism'. What is dialogism? And how can it be linked to culture?

1.1. Dialogism:

Ferdinand De Saussure studied the relationship of signs to each other, but this structuralist school considered the text as 'discrete, closed-off entities' and focused on the internal structure of a text (quoted in Chandler 2008). As a result, post-structuralism came to the front claiming that a poem or novel is not a closed entity, and literature – in general – was seen as "*irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single center, essence, or meaning*" (Siegel 2008).

The novel not only depicts human beings and their society, but it "*necessarily depicts the disparate languages spoken in [that] society*" (Baldrige 1994: 111) these languages are used by the different social classes, be they literate or not.

Dialogues in the novel are very important, they let the reader know about the events at the same time as the characters do, and provide (the dialogues) a kind of suspense; the reader keeps waiting for the character to step in, in order to know what happened, whereas, if the novel were based exclusively on narration, the reader would be bored and Cates Baldrige calls it (the dialogue) the "*verbal exchange between two or more characters*" (1994: 111).

Bakhtin is no more talking about dialogues only; he introduces a new word 'heteroglossia'. At any time and in any place, utterances will unavoidably be changed by a set of conditions; "social, historical, meteorological, physiological", an utterance

will have *"a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; [and] all utterances are heteroglot"* (Bakhtin 1981: 424)

Bakhtin reached dialogism through heteroglossia. Because languages are heteroglot, there are constant dialogues between them. Yet, dialogism does not concern languages alone. He considers that the novel is characterized by "dialogized heteroglossia" (Bressler 2007: 46). For, dialogism in the novel concerns not only the language used by the several social classes of the characters (here we have the diversity of languages associated with a diversity of characters), but the language used by the author of the novel as well, this type of dialogism concerns texts. That is, the writer is going to use someone else's words – or text, in order to answer his needs; *"the prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions"* (Bakhtin 1981: 299-300).

In order to make the already-known-words serve him correctly, the writer needs to reformulate them: *"the formulation of another's speech as well as its framing...both express the unitary act of dialogic interaction with that speech"* (1981: 340), there needs to be an interaction between the writer's words and those that he 'lent' in order to make a dialogic relation, *"When there is a deliberate (conscious) multiplicity of styles, there are always dialogic relations among the styles"* (Bakhtin 1986: 112). Bakhtin explains that if two utterances are juxtaposed on a semantic plane, this will result in a dialogic relation. Therefore, this implies that if two texts are put together there would be a dialogic relation, too. Lodge clarifies what Bakhtin meant by dialogism, as an answer to Lennard Davis's misunderstanding of the concept; he argues that the dialogic includes *"the quoted speech of the characters... [,] the relationship between the characters' discourses and the author's discourse...and between all these discourses and other discourses outside the text, which are imitated, evoked or alluded to"* (quoted in Baldrige 1994: 15).

Bakhtin, indeed, emphasises this relationship between texts and claims that a *"text lives only when coming into contact with another text..."* (1986: 162), coming to the conclusion hence that monologic texts do not exist; "there are not nor can there be any pure texts" (1986: 105); all texts are 'influenced' by others from the same or even different cultures.

1.2. Representation and Culture:

Literature is a system of representation where language plays a great role. Writers represent their society according to their own vision, for representation starts as an idiosyncratic (individual) psychological structure.

Literature is one of the major elements of culture. The relationship between representation and culture is that since we are alike, we represent people in the same way, but if we represent a group out of another, this means that we represent a different culture.

Edward Said explains: *"representation is a subjective restructure (of reality which is) embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and*

political ambiance of the representer" (1995: 129). If we consider nineteenth century social problem novels, for instance, there was a great amount of writers from different horizons, but who tackled the same topics; for example the rich and poor problem; master and workers confrontation; and the working class suffering. Though the topics were quite similar, the way they were dealt with by these realist writers was different, and we can see it in Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Benjamin Disraeli or George Eliot, and all these writers, we can say, belong to the same culture (period, nation), this in fact emphasizes the fact that representation is idiosyncratic.

1.3. The Reaction to a Foreign Culture:

As teachers of a foreign language (English), we have to take into account the learners' culture as well as the culture of the language taught (the English one), which is totally alien to them. Our work is to inculcate them that our culture is not a norm, and that the foreign one should not be considered wrong, because it is not a matter of wrongness or correctness, rather it is a matter of difference.

Some people believe that if they are confronted or simply know more about the foreign culture they will forget about theirs, that is why they show a kind of resistance to it. In fact students need to understand that in order to acquire a foreign language they definitely need to know about the culture of that country, and here Bakhtin explains that the discourse used in classrooms is very important since it is composed of a "language [which] is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others." (Quoted in Kramsch 2000a: 27). There should be a kind of dialogic relation between the language used in classrooms and the discourse of the 'foreign' writers, so that the students do not only think of themselves but try to see the 'other' (the foreign' in his own environment and culture) as well.

1.4. Culture, Acculturation and Interculturality:

In fact, talking about culture requires an explanation of '*enculturation*' which is the acquisition of culture throughout our life: when we grow up we acquire a culture, the one of the place where we live; '*acculturation*' is when we meet a new culture we change ours, and this is why most people are afraid of, since they believe that one's own culture is the norm, this happens for some people who go to live in a foreign country and they are completely lost and gradually come to change their native culture into the foreign one. '*Interculturation*' is when there is an exchange between two cultures and this is what Claire Kramsch explains to be a process of "*dialogue between minority cultures and dominant cultures, and are associated with issues of bilingualism and biculturalism*", so there is a kind of mixture of both the foreign and the native; when the two cultures meet and give rise to a new one and Kramsch gives the example of African-Americans and Chinese-Americans (2000b: 81-82). This is called the process of syncretism in which there is cultural adjustment, this happens

mainly for second generation immigrants who try to adjust their native culture (the one of their parents) to the foreign (the one of their actual environment).

Conclusion:

Otherness is the way you view the other and identity is the way you view yourself. Otherness and identity are intertwined, intermixed processes. Identity is a process in the making, it is not fixed, and thus the relation to the 'other' changes as well. Otherness and identity are not fixed entities. As teachers we have to change our students' discourse, and to do this we have to change their perception of the self and this by confronting them to themselves and to the 'other'.

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CV

- 1-Nom, Prénom : MOURO (née Hamza-Reguig), Wassila. Email : sawilas@hotmail.fr
- 2-Année et lieu de naissance : 17/12/1980 à Oran
- 3-Diplôme, grade, et Université : Magister, maitre assistant B, Université de Tlemcen.
- 5-Enseignement et Recherche Domaine : Doctorante en Littérature et Civilisation.