

Bakhtin Against the Darwinists and Cognitivists / *Bakhtin contra darwinianos e cognitivistas*

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ABSTRACT

This article begins with a critique of the language theory of cognitive scientists such as Steven Pinker (*The Language Instinct*), who describe in grammatical terms the complexity of human language. Their account of the pragmatics of language, however, is too simplistic, with Pinker seen as an idealist, in part because he imagines the context of speech only as shared information, neglecting the complexity represented by the conditions of utterance and seeing language as data to be processed between two bodiless computing machines. Bakhtin's different positions on language are then examined. For him, people speak with their bodies, not only their brains. Bakhtin, unlike Pinker or Saussure, did not believe that we have dictionaries in our heads, which we consult at will. For Bakhtin, the experience of language consists not of a series of positions taken, but a series of failed attempts to find a position, because there is no position available in which to respond to the demands made on us. In underlining the alienness of discourse and language, Bakhtin is a realist and provides a useful counterpoint to the idealistic and naïve positions held by some cognitive scientists.

KEYWORDS: Cognitive Science; Steven Pinker; Bodies; Idealism; Alien Discourse

RESUMO

Este artigo se inicia com uma crítica à teoria da linguagem defendida pelos cientistas cognitivistas, tal como Steven Pinker (O instinto da linguagem), que descrevem, em termos gramaticais, a complexidade da linguagem humana. Suas explicações sobre a pragmática da linguagem, contudo, são demasiadamente simplistas. Pinker é visto como um idealista, em parte porque imagina o contexto de fala apenas enquanto informação compartilhada, negligenciando, desse modo, a complexidade representada pelas condições enunciativas, bem como por ver a linguagem enquanto dados a serem processados entres duas máquinas computacionais sem corpos. Examinam-se, então, as diferentes posições de Bakhtin sobre a linguagem. Para ele, as pessoas falam com seus corpos e não apenas com seu cérebro. Diferentemente de Pinker ou Saussure, Bakhtin não acreditava que temos dicionários em nossas cabeças, que são consultados quando bem desejarmos. Para Bakhtin, a experiência da linguagem consiste não em uma série de posições tomadas, mas em uma série de tentativas fracassadas para encontrar uma posição, porque não há posição disponível na qual atenderíamos às exigências que são colocadas sobre nós. Ao ressaltar o discurso do outro e a linguagem, Bakhtin é um realista e propicia um contraponto útil para as posições ingênuas e idealistas tomadas por alguns cientistas cognitivistas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Ciência cognitiva; Steven Pinker; Corpos; Idealismo; Discurso do outro*

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The title of this article is polemical and probably ill-advised. In setting Bakhtin against the champions of natural science, I appear to have become one of those people - you know who you are - who turns to Bakhtin for comforting words about the uniquely personal dimension of language, for airy rhetoric about our responsiveness to the “other,” for reassurance that the big bad structuralists are cold-hearted bastards who have missed out on the warmth and soulfulness of language. Start on that and soon enough you find yourself going on about one’s uniquely ineffable responsibility or the irretrievable concreteness of each moment, and from there it is just a short step to Jesus, *dusha*, the “other” in me, and God only knows what else. In no time, Bakhtin will have become the theoretical teddy bear to whom one clings, hoping he will protect you from the nasty theoreticians hiding under the bed.

And what, after all, could anyone have against the good men and women who conduct research in cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, who are honest materialists, practice their craft with sobriety, and are justifiably curious about why we are able to speak and how this ability evolved? Why set oneself against them as a whole, when, speaking for myself, I like and admire the sober materialism of natural science and do not really trust the champions of raw Geist? Well, like so much of intellectual life, this particular article had in its origins in something that annoyed me. I had managed to not exactly ignore, but let us say, not get too exercised about, the rising tide of cognitive science, until I discovered one day that the one book on language that my undergraduates all seemed familiar with was Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct*. At the same time, I began to notice that, surely and not too slowly, cognitive science was beginning to colonize areas that had been the province of the human sciences: linguistics, sociology, psychology, and even its queen, philosophy. So I did my intellectual homework, read Pinker, attended a so-called “Brain Day” of research papers at my university, and promptly became annoyed by the breezy confidence with which proponents of cognitivism described the great strides they were making towards solving the mysteries of language and thought. Thus, Pinker tells us at the beginning of *The Language Instinct* that he has chosen to write at length about “the instinct to learn, speak, and understand language.” Why now? Because

for the first time in history, there is something to write about it. Some thirty-five years ago, a new science was born [this is cognitive

psychology]. The science of language, in particular, has seen spectacular advances in the years since (PINKER, 1995, p.17).

You can see why one might be annoyed, Pinker's remarkable and winning eloquence notwithstanding.

But scholarship demands that one either use one's annoyance or explore it, so to speak. And because cognitive science is the discipline that is making the running these days when it comes to the study of language - it is the approach that commands attention and response in the wider intellectual world - it was clear that I had to explore mine. Needless to say, annoyance only reaches its true pitch if the thing that irritates is something you know you must take seriously. One cannot for a moment doubt that language and thought depend, in the final instance (if I may put it that way) on blood, muscle, and brain. So the idea of explaining it in those terms is entirely reasonable, even desirable. Language may be the carrier of the spirit, or the transcendental condition of culture and thought, but it is also the making of sounds and marks by animals. So if one is annoyed by cognitivism, it is not because it is materialist, because it snuffs out the eternal flame of spirit, but because it is not materialist enough. And if one is willing to pin one's colours to the 'Bakhtinian mast yet one more time, it will have to be because our lonely philosopher - the one who talks unashamedly of the irrevocable difference Christ has made to the world - is in some way more materialist, or at least materialist in a better way, than the Pinkers and Dawkinses of this world. In fact, I believe he is, and I would like to demonstrate this in the remainder of this short piece.

What is the cognitivist argument? I will summarize it in reference to Steven Pinker's position, as he is the most prominent advocate of the cognitivist case in linguistics, although by no means all cognitivists argue for his particular version. Pinker's argument has, I believe, four fundamental tenets. The first is that the faculty of language is essentially the ability to form grammatical sentences, that is, well-formed utterances based on the deployment of a few fundamental rules and the knowledge of a lexicon. This conception of language is taken more or less entirely from Chomsky, who said at the beginning of his career that the main task of linguistics was to explain how an infinite number of new sentences could be generated on the basis of a finite, limited experience of language. According to Pinker we understand sentences by analyzing them according to

grammatical rules about phrase structure, and produce them by using these rules to put what we wish to say in an intelligible form.

The second tenet, in principle separable from the first, but in fact usually joined to it at the hip, is that this grammar is innate, in the sense that it is part of our biological endowment and not something learned. As you may know, for Pinker, and in many respects for Chomsky, the main evidence supporting the innateness thesis is the ease with which children master language as a system despite their necessarily limited exposure to it. Pinker repeatedly points to how even children suffering from various environmental deficits, spontaneously – or so it seems at least – master the complex grammar of their native tongue in a few years. Children, as Pinker has put it, “must be equipped with a plan common to all grammars, a Universal Grammar, that tells them how to distill the syntactic patterns out of the speech of their parents” (PINKER, 1995, p.22). You may also know that this thesis is controversial, as it supposes that at some level all natural languages and even some artificial ones share a grammatical structure. In a now well known attack on the innateness thesis, the philosopher Hilary Putnam argued that no one should be surprised that in a few years children who spend most of their time trying to speak and listen eventually master the task (PUTNAM, 1967, p.19).

The third tenet, which is really only adhered to by a subset of the cognitivist world, is that there is a distinct language module in the physical brain, which is to say that it is not merely the happy outcome of some generalized intelligence and that it is localized, in the sense that you can be really smart, but unable to speak, or really not-so-smart, yet a fluent chatterbox.

The final tenet is that this module and the faculty of language it makes possible are the result of natural selection, and that they evolved because, and to the extent that, they conferred a reproductive advantage on early humans. From this perspective, language has a distinct function in the propagation of our species. It is a mechanism for coping with our environment, in the limited sense that it helps keep us alive long enough that we can have children and keep them alive, too. This is, in many ways, the most controversial part of Pinker’s position.¹ Chomsky, for instance, does not agree with it: he has argued that while the cognitive capacities language depends on are products of evolution, their specific application to language was probably fortuitous (HAUSER et al., 2002). The evolutionary

¹ Pinker’s most detailed and complex justification for this claim is found in an article published before *The Language Instinct*; see Pinker and Bloom, 1990.

claim does not merely cement the innateness hypothesis; it also assigns language a distinct function, or so its adherents believe.

Bakhtin has his own theory of language evolution, which goes like this:

God did not create humans when he made them from clay and dust (these were the natural steps to humanity, which concluded with the ape) but when he infused them with living spirit. In doing this he passed beyond the boundaries of nature and natural lawfulness (the beginning of the spiritual history of humanity) (BAKHTIN, 2002a, p.395).²

Bakhtin's story of how we passed from apes to language-using humans, depending as it does on some old-fashioned divine intervention, does not strike me as very promising, and certainly no match for Pinker. Ironically, it is Bakhtin's famous comments on the witness and the judge that make a better starting point. Let me recall them:

The witness and the judge. With the appearance of consciousness in the world (in being), and maybe with the appearance of biological life (perhaps not only animals, but also trees and grass witness and judge), the world – being - changes radically. A stone remains a stone, a sun the sun, but the event of being as an unfinished whole becomes completely different, because a new and important actor in the event enters the scene of earthly life for the first time: the witness and judge. The sun, while remaining physically the same, has become different, because the witness and judge have become conscious of it. It has ceased to simply be, and has begun to be in itself and for itself (these categories appear for the first time) and for the other (because it is reflected in the consciousness of the other), it is changed by this radically, it has been enriched, transformed (BAKHTIN, 2002a, p.396).

Is this a big improvement? It is, because in this passage, which in fact follows fairly soon after the earlier one, the introduction of language is registered not as the

² A brief textological parenthesis is in order: the quotation is drawn from a text that has been dubbed the Working Notes from the 1960s and early 1970s in the recently published 6th volume of the *Collected Works* of Bakhtin being prepared in Russia. These working notes are taken from four notebooks and some random pages in Bakhtin's archive. Parts of these notes were published under the titles Notes from 1970-71 and Towards a Methodology of the Human Sciences. In the article "The Polyphony of the Circle" [written by I. Medvedev, D. Medvedeva and D. Shepherd and published in this issue of *Bakhtiniana*], the authors mention that I once had written that, thanks to recent Russian scholarship, we know less about Bakhtin's life than we used to. One could have added: we now have fewer texts of Bakhtin's as well. The 6th volume has certainly done its bit in this regard. In the notes and commentary, we are informed, first, that many of the notes from 1970–1971 do not, in fact, come from 1970–1971, but are more likely to have been written in the 1960s; second, that the text "Towards a Methodology of the Human Sciences" is not a text at all, but notes from different sources put together by Bakhtin's executor V.V. Kozhinov, who published them without Bakhtin's consent.

addition of spirit to matter, but as the transformation of matter itself. That is, Bakhtin describes language as introducing a kind of rupture or inconsistency in nature. (He stresses, in the next paragraph, that this not a matter of the doubling of being in consciousness, so that you would have being and *then* its representation in consciousness, but of the transformation of “natural” being into something different). And in this respect, I think he is aware of something that has escaped the grasp of cognitivists like Pinker: the fact that language does not merely allow us to do things we did before - cooperate, hunt, gather, make babies - a little better, but changes what we do, why we do it, and what it means to do it. Or, to put it in language that an evolutionary psychologist might prefer: the evolution of language does not solve problems posed by our evolutionary niche as much as it creates some fundamentally new ones.

In Pinker’s world, language confers on humans an evolutionary advantage because it makes possible more efficient cooperation and collaboration. This “extraordinary gift” as he describes it, “the ability to dispatch an infinite number of precisely structured thoughts from head to head by modulating exhaled breath,” allows our ancestors to share “hard-won knowledge with kin and friends,” making our prolonged existence on this earth much more likely (PINKER, 1995, pp.362, 367). In the face of this cheery anthropology one hesitates, therefore, to point out that the acquisition of the language faculty also makes it possible for humans to squabble and even slaughter each other with astonishing brutality, to the point where it often seems that our time on this earth is likely to be relatively brief, and that we will be survived by speechless rats and cockroaches. One cannot, of course, just draw a line from language to nuclear war or the destruction of the earth as a livable environment, any more than one can move from the first articulate grunts to Mozart’s operas or the Declaration of the Rights of Man. But there is a real case to be made that Pinker, insofar as he thinks of language as merely something that makes members of the species more efficient, has missed something fundamental that Bakhtin, in his somewhat obscure way, has thrown into relief.

A relatively simple way to describe what is at stake would be to say that although Pinker is at pains to describe the magnificent complexity of the language we use in grammatical terms, his account of the pragmatics of language, so to speak, is woefully simplistic, amounting to no more than a rehash of the famous circuit of language described by Saussure. In his view, language is simply a means to exteriorize thoughts, thoughts

which amount to propositions, so that they become available to others. (I should point out that this aspect of his language theory is also controversial, and cognitivists like Jerry Fodor, for example, think the primary function of language is to give shape to our thoughts rather than pass them on to someone else). We have ideas, we translate them into marks or sounds so that others may translate them back into the same ideas, but in their own heads. This is what Roy Harris has called the “telementational” model of communication, and it has been kicking around since John Locke (HARRIS, 2003).

Harris and many others have criticized the telementational model of communication at great length, and in particular they have pointed out that “telementation” only works if you have an absolutely fixed code for translating thoughts into words and vice versa; otherwise, you can never really be sure that the thoughts rolling round in the head of the listener are the same as the ones you thought you communicated by your exquisitely modulated breath. Pinker thinks he has cracked that one by hard-wiring the code into our brains, although I think he will still have issues once he remembers we speak English, or French or Korean, not “Universal Grammar.” But his real problems are much bigger and more serious and they are summed up in Bakhtin’s comment that “[o]ne cannot understand understanding as the translation from an alien discourse into one’s own language” (BAKHTIN, 2002a, p.403). One cannot understand understanding in that way, because one does not just access a common code when language is in play: one occupies a *position* in relation to language, a position that dictates what understanding amounts to.

The child whose rapid mastery of an idiom so entralls Pinker is not trying to learn a skill that someday will help him hunt and gather and procreate: he is responding to the utterances of his parents, invested as they are with weight and authority. In the psychoanalytic tradition, the entrance into language is traumatic, because the discourse of the other to which the child responds evokes a kind of radical fear. After all, you do not “learn” to cooperate with your parents, you are compelled to; that is, what you learn to do is *obey* their utterances. This “contextual” element is not something you then eventually outgrow, but remains the very substance of communication. In the Working Notes, Bakhtin continually harps on “alien discourse” as both the everpresent condition of speech and as the “specific object of study in the human sciences” (BAKHTIN, 2002a, p.401). But to say speech is alien is not say that it is different in tone or style or lexicon: it is way of saying that even words you yourself might have spoken have a different meaning and

significance when they are something to which you must respond. Being a listener or speaker is a bit like being the prime minister of a failing government: you are constantly having to “consider your position.”

In a famous passage in *Author and Hero*, Bakhtin remarks that “When I empathize with the suffering of another, I experience it precisely as *his* suffering, in the category of the *other*, and my reaction to it is not a cry of pain but a comforting word and an act of help” (BAKHTIN, 2003, p.107). *Author and Hero* pretends to be about perception, time and space, but it is really about language, and the empathy Bakhtin describes here is no more than the understanding one extends to “alien discourse.” Pinker knows, deep inside, that words in well-formed sentences alone do not mean much of anything, and he is therefore willing to concede that “understanding, then, requires integrating the fragments gleaned from a sentence into a vast mental database” (PINKER, 1995, p.227). But it is precisely there that his “idealism” lies, because he cannot imagine the context of speech except as shared information, that is, only insofar as the actual conditions of an utterance have been transformed into data ready for processing.

Pinker’s human animal thus finds itself bisected into a calculating machine, for which language is an instrument or tool in the struggle for existence, and a body with the usual panoply of animal needs: for food, shelter, conjugal relations with other animals, and the rest of it. The *reason* we speak is because it helps us get things we want, though the things we want seem uncoupled from the speaking itself. Self-interested creatures whose intelligence is in effect a calculating tool: does that sound familiar? Is it not our old friend, *homo economicus*, from liberal political economy?³ Comparing Bakhtin with Walter Benjamin,⁴ Tatiana Bubnova reminds us that, according to the latter’s philosophy of language, communication was merely the “bourgeois function” of language, a pale and bloodless role to which it could, but should not, be reduced. Insofar as the process of natural selection mirrors and reflects the structure of the market, it effects the same simplification and reduction of language. Language itself becomes the fabled invisible hand: its cunning ensures that, although each organism has only its own interests, we will end up speaking, sharing, and cooperating with one another. But just as the market

³ Darwin’s borrowing from the social and political ideas of his time is well known, although his recent advocates tend not to mention it. For a recent contribution to this intellectual history, see Hodge, 2009.

⁴ Editor’s Note: The translation of this article [from Russian into English and from English into Portuguese] is also published here in the issue of *Bakhtiniana*.

promised prosperity for all and a happy equilibrium, but delivered prosperity for some and the endless exploitation of most, so natural selection has given us - if it has responsibility for the matter at all - not only the greatest file-sharing system ever invented, but also the means by which we insult and humiliate one another.

For words not only help the body meet its needs; they restructure it. As Bubnova rightly points out, a merely “prosaic” conception of Bakhtin’s work ignores what he shares with Benjamin: the conviction that language catapults us into a sphere of “*expressive and speaking being*.”⁵ For both Benjamin and Bakhtin, a body that speaks is not simply a body with new and better means for achieving the same old ends, but a wholly different sort of being, which cannot be understood as if it were merely a more sophisticated natural object. As Žižek has elegantly put it, “the fact that man is a speaking being means precisely that he is, so to speak, constitutively ‘derailed,’” unable to achieve or maintain a natural homeostasis or balance (ŽIŽEK, 1992, p.36). The future is no longer a strictly practical horizon and human drives find themselves drawn off course, aiming for satisfactions unknown to mute nature. In both Benjamin and Bakhtin, this derailment is described in theological terms, as if language itself had put redemption and revelation on the table. But when Bakhtin claims, in the text quoted above, that “[t]he spirit freely speaks to us of its own immortality, but cannot *prove* it,” he does no more than point to a sphere of belief that structures human action, sometimes with divine sanction, sometimes not (BAKHTIN, 1996, p.8).

Ironically, it is theology that, in Bakhtin as well as Benjamin, ensures a materialist approach to language. But however much it trumpets its scientific credentials, cognitive science remains stubbornly idealistic when it comes to language. It cannot imagine speech as anything but a conversation between two bodiless computing machines, which register elements of the earthly physical world by turning them into information for processing. But brains do not speak to one another; people do, and they speak with their bodies, not just their mouths.⁶ Pinker, like others who claim that language has its own special bit of the brain, argues that while language is an affair of the cerebral cortex, that fancy bit of the brain responsible for higher functions - crying, laughing, being afraid and the rest of it - are

⁵ This phrase is taken from a short text by Bakhtin, 1996, p.8.

⁶ Peter Hacker makes a related point when he argues that evolutionary psychology is prone to treat “brain” and “mind” as if they were identical, when the syntax of ordinary language clearly indicates they are not. See his contribution to Bennett et al., 2009.

bound to a subcortical region that we share with non-linguistic animals. But language is completely embedded in the subcortical; its meanings are not ideas which then, through some series of mental calculations, cause us to laugh or cry, but forms in which we negotiate laughing, crying, anxiety, fear, and the rest of it. Wittgenstein continually insisted that it made no sense to think that we made another copy of language inside ourselves: the link between language and action was more akin to a kind of training, although the training was not nearly as stress-free as Wittgenstein - surely one of the most anxiety-ridden intellectuals ever to pick up a pen – implied (WITTGENSTEIN, 1969).

Bakhtin describes the subcortical dimension of language in terms of the discourse of others or alien speech. Becoming a competent speaker, in his account, is not a matter of learning to separate out the pure meaning from the subcortical add-ons, but of taking a position in relation to the language or languages which will allay our anxieties and make us happy. Or, to put it differently, it is a matter of learning how to be a successful novelist—that is, successful in the sense that Flaubert, not J.K. Rowling, is successful. We do not, *à la* Pinker or Saussure, have a dictionary in our head, which we consult every time we need it: we have a novel there, and the only question is whether the one we have ended up with is a Victorian comedy by Dickens, a religious comedy by Dostoevsky, or the latest offering by Danielle Steel. It is in this precise sense that “relations between utterances [...] are likewise personalistic,” that is, that they are irreducible to logical or linguistic relations (BAKHTIN, 2002a, p.390).

Relations among our utterances are personalistic, but it might be better to say relations among persons are novelistic. The latter formulation reminds us that language has a history - something for which evolutionary theory is not prepared - and that one cannot separate the achievements of the species from the history of its language. In Bakhtin’s work, that history is the history of the novel, the means by which we learn to refract the discourse of others in a particular manner, through a distinctive “authorial position.” In the 1960s, the notion of an authorial position in the polyphonic novel became the greatest source of public controversy over Bakhtin’s work, and he spent a good deal of time refining what he meant.⁷ The confusion arose because critics assumed this position was

⁷ See his comments on “polyphony” in the short text originally published and translated as *Towards a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book* (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.285-6). This text, like those mentioned above, is something of a concoction, being an arbitrarily selected section of a notebook, the contents of which have now been published whole as *1961 god. Zаметki* (BAKHTIN, 2002b). The relevant passages are found on pp.341–3.

that of a neutral arbiter among the voices of polyphony, whereas, in fact, the author of the polyphonic novel had an awful lot of work to do if it was to force those voices into the right shape. It was a matter not of making a space in which voices could come and play, but of establishing a distinctive position in relation to them. This is what is at stake when Bakhtin discusses at some length “the search for one’s own (authorial) voice” (BAKHTIN, 2002a, p.411). The search for one’s voice is not a matter of self-expression, but a question of how you position yourself in relation to the discourse surrounding you.

If I am not mistaken, this is what Galin Tihanov meant by his apt and eloquent description of Bakhtin’s theory as “humanism without subjectivity.”⁸ It is a description, so to speak, of personal relations, which, however, depend not on the intentions of a subject, but on an array of discourses, in which we are caught from the very beginning. And the achievement of this humanism depends on historical development, the slow labour of novel-making, which creates possibilities and positions which were not available at an earlier time. The ability to quote, to refract, to parody, to ironize, are not, in Bakhtin’s account, individual achievements, but cultural ones, which make possible for all of us relations to alien discourse that otherwise would remain unthinkable. And in the end, I think, postmodernism is one way to describe the latest array of these possibilities.

But it is not all a question of possibility, new formations, a happy humanism. In truth, the novel constraining most people’s lives is probably some unhappy mix of Joycean banality and Kafkaesque terror. For all of what I have said thus far, in common with cognitivist accounts, assumes that language actually *works*, whereas nothing could be more in doubt. Pinker and his ilk write as if what one had to explain was the success of language, its striking achievement as a means of communication. But maybe language, whatever aspirations it may harbour, is, in fact, mostly a record of failure, or of failure mixed with achievement. Zizek has argued that language is necessarily organized around an absence or inconsistency, that to know a language well is not to understand its words and grammar, but to understand precisely the points at which its words fail us. I think there is something to that. But perhaps the more important point is that the positions one needs to occupy in language are not always *there*, and “the search for one’s own (authorial) discourse” often ends unsuccessfully. For many of us - maybe, to be perfectly honest, most of us - the experience of language consists not of a series of positions taken up, but a series

⁸ I am guessing that this is a clever reworking of the notorious description of structuralism as “Kantianism without a subject.”

of failed attempts to find a position, attempts that fail because there is no position yet available in which to respond to the demands made on us. Bakhtin was dimly aware of this, I think. The description in *Author and Hero* of the anxiety that besets the naked *I-for-myself*, for whom no object is solid and no performance satisfactory, is, in fact, description of a subject that cannot find a position in language, which of course makes more sense than the idea of a subject which is somehow cut off from language. But what Bakhtin is not quite ready to admit - and what the cognitivists are not quite able to conceive of - is that we are often left stranded by language, because there is no position to occupy in relation to the other, no response which could really count as a response, no novel which will frame the situation adequately. At which point, language is the sphere in which one becomes frustrated, resentful, mute, or violent.

One cannot be absolutely sure, but I do not think our chimpanzee cousins, our mammalian uncles or our more distant animal relations have this problem. They may become frustrated, and they certainly get angry from time to time, but the entire problem of finding a successful place in language is foreign to them. If you think language is just a fancy form of file-sharing, you are probably not seeing the problem. But that is because you really have not got the hang of language, which, whatever its origin, creates as many difficulties as it solves. It allows us to make tools, and makes possible the most severe humiliations. It creates a new kind of cultural memory, and enables us to nurse grudges that last for centuries. In equal measure, it is the source of future planning and of endless anxiety. Steven Pinker is amazed by its grammatical sophistication—which is fine—but he thinks this grammar inevitably leads us to cooperate with one another, which is unjustifiably optimistic and not the least scientific.

Bakhtin has been criticized, even by many devoted to him, for his idealism, his faith in the power of the novel, his belief that if we only let heteroglossia run free, everything would work out fine. Compared with the cognitivists and the evolutionary psychologists, however, he is a model of sobriety and detachment. To imagine language as one more biological tool, on a par with opposable thumbs or bipedalism, is not so much reductive as naïve. In this case, it is the human sciences, with their focus on the alienness of discourse, that stand up for sober realism, while natural science is weaving fairy tales.

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