

Giving Voice: Studies in honour of Christine Anthonissen

Marcelyn Oostendorp

Department of General Linguistics, Stellenbosch University, South Africa
E-mail: moostendorp@sun.ac.za

1. Introduction

The central concern of this special issue is the notion of ‘voice’. Although widely used in humanities research, this concept is not without contestation. Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard and Freedman (2011:71) state that voice is seen as “fuzzy, slippery” and “hard to define”. Within literacy studies, for example, voice has come to represent concepts such as ‘authorship’, ‘the self in text and discourse’ and ‘writing style’ (Sperling et al. 2011:70). Despite these different usages the concept remains popular, partly because it offers “an engaging metaphor for human agency and identity” (Sperling et al. 2011: 70).

According to Sperling et al. (2011:74), any theoretical discussion on voice as a socially- and culturally-mediated phenomenon must begin with the work of Bakhtin. Bakhtin (1981), in his essay on discourse in the novel, defines the novel as “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organised”. Crucially, Bakhtin (1981: 270) did not conceptualise different voices as being in a harmonious relationship. Rather, he viewed voices as imbued with centralizing forces trying to impose standards, while at the same time centrifugal forces induce processes that attempt to decentralize. Bakhtin (1981:270) puts it thus: “Every utterance participates in the unitary language in its centripetal forces and tendencies and partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)”. Despite this emphasis on struggle and tension, Blommaert (2008:427) states that there are “Bakhtin light” readings of voice, which view communication as dialogic without necessarily focusing on the conditions under which certain voices are more audible than others. Blommaert (2008:427) prefers a more “high-calorie Bourdieusian interpretation” in which different voices never meet on “neutral ground”. Voice for Blommaert (2008) is thus intrinsically linked to inequality. Blommaert (2008:427) states that “people use language and other semiotic means in attempts to have voice, to make themselves understood by others”, but that voice is a social product subject to processes of selection and exclusion. Sperling et al. (2011:70) argue that some theorists only discuss “voice in its apparent absence”. However, Blommaert is not only interested in the absence of voice, but also in instances where people are in positions of inequality but still manage to exercise voice. Hymes (1996), an early user of the notion, saw an equal society as one in which an individual has the “freedom to have one’s voice heard, freedom to develop a voice worth hearing”, and states that “one way to think of the society in which one would like to live is to think of the kinds of voices it would have”.

Revisiting Christine's work for this special issue, it struck me that a significant part of her work has addressed silence. This includes silencing in the forms of censorship and silence in positions of inequality and in the face of trauma (Anthonissen 2001, 2008). Her interest in silence included both censorship where the powerful "may forcibly silence others or authoritatively withhold information", and "censorship of the vulnerable who are forcibly silenced or withhold information in fear, in shame, in uncertainty or sometimes in resistance" (Anthonissen 2008:402). Interestingly, she thus also considered the agentive possibilities of the deliberate withholding of voice.

The articles and research notes in this issue all deal either with the absence of voice, or with the exercise of voice in contexts of inequality. The papers can be divided into three broad themes (with many articles overlapping or addressing more than one of these themes). This thematic organisation is thus only one possible organisation of the different voices within this special issue.

2. Speaking out: Decentering the centre

Bock, Mongie, Sobane & Magampa, Van Dulm & Southwood and Van der Walt all address topics that have received limited attention within applied linguistics research, or semiotic resources that are usually marginalised within formal contexts. Bock focuses on the use of multimodal resources which are usually undervalued in the schooling system. She shows that children use these resources (such as drawing and fantasy play) naturally and are active sign-makers. Similarly, Brand's research note focuses on children's early literacy practices. She argues that the schooling system should make space for other linguistic varieties in addition to standardised written varieties. This will lead to greater student engagement and ultimately to the exercise of voice. Van Dulm & Southwood investigate the influence of socio-economic status (SES) on the development of school-related language in New Zealand. They find that despite the economic resources allocated to the New Zealand educational system, students from low-SES homes continue to underperform compared to their more affluent peers. This paper highlights the continued importance of SES in research into school language practices, even in so-called "developed" nations.

Mongie's study investigates the framing of LGBT discourses within the South African media. Despite the advances that have been made in terms of legal protection for LGBT communities in South Africa, academic research in this area is still lagging behind. Mongie's contribution suggests that a methodological framework combining Queer Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis can contribute not only to the academic study of discourses on LGBT communities, but also to social activism in this area. Sobane & Magampa show how patients are rendered voiceless within the HIV/AIDS care process in clinics in Lesotho and how this prevents implementation of patient-centred care. They suggest that one way in which the care process could become more patient-centred is by ensuring that doctors become more proficient in the linguistic varieties that their patients speak. Van der Walt focuses on micro language planning as opposed to the more frequently researched macro-planning. Her findings suggest that lecturers should be given the skills and the space to do policy-making in the moment according to the needs of their classrooms and the nature of learning. Busch's research note investigates the "violence of voicelessness" experienced by an individual living in precarious circumstances, and highlights the (surprising) use of linguistic resources in resilience and subsequently in instilling voice.

3. Harmonies, contradictions and contestations

The papers organised under this theme (Banda, Berghoff & Huddleston, Feinauer, Kaschula, Shartiely and Muysken) all point out, through various forms of discursive analysis, how discourses within a single text or institution can stand in contradiction or contestation to one another, or, when seemingly in contradiction, actually speak out of the same mouth. This collection of papers therefore addresses the tensions between different voices. Banda shows how a variety of semiotic resources are used together in contradictory and complementary ways in online media in Zambia, while Berghoff & Huddleston leave the reader with the question of what kinds of voices count. In their relevance-theoretic analysis of narrative truth within one testimony presented before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, they raise the ethical question of what happens when “certain kinds of narrative are deemed ‘untruthful’ and remain figuratively unheard”. Bernard’s critical analysis of the testimonies of Marikana mineworkers reveal that even though workers engaged in practices that protested against “a repressive economic and social system” in their testimonies, they used the same kinds of neoliberal discourses as the mine owners. Bernard thus raises the important question of how dominant ideologies are taken up in discourses and practices that seemingly contradict them. Feinauer’s investigation into the reframing and translation of information on online media platforms owned by one media house finds that for Afrikaans readers “reports were phrased in more neutral terms, or they were less sensational, less harsh and less negative than their English counterparts”. Institutional discourses are thus multiple and change according to who the intended receiver is.

Two articles under this theme are situated within higher education. Kaschula points out the contradiction between the prevalence of policies at South African universities that foreground transformation, while (with a few exceptions) African languages are almost completely invisible. Shartiely’s article points out contradictions in the opposite direction. Despite policies at the University of Dar es Salaam that prohibit the use of languages other than English in the classroom, lecturers make themselves understood by their students by utilising codeswitching. Muysken argues in his research note that the Dutch engage in discriminatory discourses and practices while contradictorily viewing themselves as *goed* (‘good’) rather than *fout* (‘wrong’). He argues further that “assuming oneself to be *goed* stands in the way of self-reflection and acts as a shield of moral invincibility”.

4. Representation of voice: Researcher and researched

The papers organised under this theme all look critically at the position of the researcher in relation to participants, or in relation to the field of research (Von Maltzan, Southwood & D’Oliveira, Richards, Kerfoot, Williams). Von Maltzan evaluates the position of German Studies within Africa. She is specifically interested in how two academic journals in the field of German Studies “participate in the postcolonial project of ‘writing back’ or rewriting colonialism in order to develop a new understanding of their participation in knowledge production”. Southwood & D’Oliveira investigate the reasons behind the disappointing results of a language stimulation programme. In particular, they ask who does research in intervention studies, and what the effects are if the researcher does not share the participants’ social class and linguistic resources. Richards’ paper, which is based on her autoethnographic research into her own lived experiences, finds “a clear influence of the very discourses to which [she] was trying to provide counter-narratives” in the different texts she produced. She reflects on

the fact that in the process of writing her autoethnography, she silenced her own narratives. It is however exactly from these moments of tension and paradox that new narratives could arise. Williams, in his study of Rastafarian-herbalists and the enregisterment of multilingual voice, reflects on his own voice and role in data collection, as well as on how he represents himself in his transcriptions. Kerfoot, in her research note, reflects on her own involvement in NGO work in adult education. She wonders to what extent her representations can be considered trustworthy, located as she is within a multivocal “set of discourses on race, culture and society”. She argues that it is partly through increased reflexivity that she gained “greater epistemic caution” and more confidence in her assertions.

5. The struggle (for voice) continues

All of the papers in this issue foreground topics, research methodologies, or participants that are usually under-represented, silenced, misrepresented, or presented in ways which erase tension and ambivalence. The collection of papers in particular raises the following questions:

- (i) Whose voices do we take on as researchers?
- (ii) How do we represent voice?
- (iii) Is a standard research article in standard academic language the best way to showcase diversity, fragmentation and decentralization?
- (iv) How can we ethically engage with our research participants?
- (v) How do we become more reflexive as researchers?

Perhaps in trying to find answers to these questions, we should keep in mind Hymes’ (1996) view of what scientists interested in inequality should do. Hymes (1996:60) argued that

The proper role of the scientist, and the goal of his and her efforts, should not be ‘extractive’, but mediative. It should be to help communities be ethnographers of their own situations, to relate their knowledge usefully to general knowledge, not merely to test and document. Such a role could be the safeguard of both the intellectual and the ethical purposes of the science itself.

In our pursuit of the study of voice and agency, we should keep track of the communities, topics, phenomena or discourses for which we want to provide a voice. The communities themselves should not be silenced in our homogenized, standardised research papers. Taking Christine’s work forward demands that the way in which our work is presented should not further perpetuate the “violence of voicelessness”.

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