

## Co-authoring Speech Genres: A Bakhtinian Approach to Mutually Recognitive Dialogue

In his theory of communicative action, Habermas takes language to be a fundamentally intersubjective tool used for the activity of reaching mutual understanding.<sup>1</sup> Interlocutors assume the *freedom* to question claims made in discourse and use *reason* to achieve communicative *power* together.<sup>2</sup> Thus language in itself forms the drive mechanism of successful discourse—only by presupposing the ability of other subjects to take language as an alterable, reason-based, and empowering tool is mutually recognitive dialogue possible.<sup>3</sup> However, beyond these basic presuppositions, interlocutors always maintain, I argue, an acute appreciation for the particular *ways* of speaking—what Bakhtin termed “speech genres”<sup>4</sup>—at work in conversation.<sup>5</sup> In just this sense, subjects cannot be said to enter freely into a situation of rational communicative exchange if one or another stereotyped mode of speech (i.e., a regulatory or exclusionary speech genre) threatens to undermine the very communicative freedom that, on Habermas’ view, subjects must have in order to respond as loci of creative self-assertion, as interlocutors with equally valid subjective positions. I claim, therefore, that sensitivity to the influence speech genre choices have

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions, and the Lifeworld," in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 215-255.

<sup>2</sup> See Klaus Günther, "Communicative Freedom, Communicative Power, and Jurisgenesis," in *Habermas on Law and Democracy: Critical Exchanges*, eds. Michel Rosenfeld and Andrew Arato (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 234–254, for a concise explanation of these terms.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 21-103.

<sup>4</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 60-102.

<sup>5</sup> See Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990) throughout for a comprehensive overview of Bakhtin's work.

on subjects in dialogue poses subjects as ethically responsible for the co-creation<sup>6</sup> of ways of speaking that are more or less enabling for interlocutors in context. Only with such an effortful attunement to the genres of speech which delimit what can and cannot be said prior to engagement in dialogue is there any chance for genuine communicative freedom to occur. This position of reciprocity acknowledges that validity claims are always raised within regulatory genres of speech, and that, as such, these modes themselves must remain open to acceptance or rejection as criticizable validity claims.

### **Speaking in Genres**

While individual utterance acts are unique, different spheres of communication depend upon relatively stable types of utterances, what Bakhtin terms “speech genres.” Primary genres, those used by speakers in context, include the everyday rejoinder or simple written message. Secondary genres, on the other hand, re-present primary genres in an abstracted form, such as the novel, dramatic work, scientific research paper, or legal transcript; here, the original context of the utterance is removed and the utterance no longer “belongs” to the original speakers but instead conforms to the patterns of expression in the larger work (i.e., it is a new utterance). Speech genres regulate the style of the utterance act by outlining the norms for the construction of the whole, including its completion and the relation to be enacted between speaker and hearer. The boundaries between utterances consist in the change of speaking subjects; the speaker ends

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<sup>6</sup> Dialogue is arguably Bakhtin's most important conceptual focus (see Michael Holquist, *Dialogism* [New York: Routledge, 1990]). Grappling with the new problems in theories of perception and temporality inaugurated by the work of Einstein and Bohr, Bakhtin attempted to work out the implications for self-other relations, especially with regard to communication. His emphasis on what might be called the “aesthetics” of communication—that is, the ways in which two individuals engage in linguistic and bodily semiotic exchange in order to create coherent understandings of self and other that expand the signifying boundaries of both—is featured most prominently in Bakhtin's major work on aesthetics/ethics, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), as well as in his analysis of the author-hero relationship in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (PDP)*, trans./ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

her utterance in order to “relinquish the floor to the other or to make room for the other's active responsive understanding.”<sup>7</sup> The point at which this change occurs Bakhtin calls “finalization,” which involves three main factors: (1) the semantic exhaustiveness of the theme (what needs to be said), (2) the speaker's speech plan (subjective bearing), and (3) the rules for finalization of a typical utterance in the genre.

Because Habermas does not have this sophisticated an account of semiotics at the level of the utterance act, he cannot approach communicative interaction with the same degree of precision as Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, the utterance act is the articulation of a subjective bearing on an issue which cannot occur in routinized, systematic, or “sedimented” language. Indeed, these abstract forms acquire value only by removing the subjective impulse, the “eruption” of meaning which happens as a result of this or that particular subject’s issuing a *response* to language “as such” from the subject's place (a gap) in the dialogic-symbolic order.<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin, by focusing on the utterance act as the locus of fundamental tension<sup>9</sup> between the subject’s take and the other’s take, between speech and system, subjective belief and historical ideology, etc., exposes the important role that dialogue plays in identity formation; subjective life-narratives, saturated with unique and nuanced speech-pattern experiences, demonstrate the impossibility of the theoretical reduction of communicative presuppositions to an abstract, formal pragmatics. No statement is ever a plain recapitulation of symbols derived from an amodal signifying system of differences: constitutive of the subject’s speech is an always-potentiating re-iteration of these would-be

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<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 71.

<sup>8</sup> See Bakhtin, *PDP*, esp. 5-77, for more about the dialogic relationship. I also want to make an analogy to Lacan's notion of the subject. In *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Funk (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 678, Lacan says, "The cut made by the signifying chain is the only cut that verifies the structure of the subject as a discontinuity in the real." That is, the subject first makes its appearance as an individuating "break" in the undifferentiated symbolic order.

<sup>9</sup>Bakhtin, *PDP*, 32. Also, his *Speech Genres*, esp. 90-91.

systems, based on the agency of the subject as the unique site of the redeployment of signifying norms.<sup>10</sup> Subjects always pay attention to the specific genres of speech that have influenced their communicative practices, including what they understand to be the modes of attunement that facilitate mutual recognition. What Habermas leaves woefully abstract, then, Bakhtin makes concrete: now the deeply existential problems involved in the interaction of conflicting voices in dialogue finally come to light.<sup>11</sup>

Because every utterance act is unique, each demands accountability of the subject. But the act represents the agency of the speaker to a greater or lesser degree depending on the genre of speech in which the act is performed. Artistic genres, for instance, involve a high level of subjective expression because they demand creativity from the individual as constitutive of the act itself. In contrast, utterances in the most highly regulated speech genres, such as the military command or legal document, assume only minimal subjective quality, limited to an almost “epiphenomenal” result of the simple fact that a particular person uttered this particular speech act.<sup>12</sup> On Bakhtin's view, the speaker's choice of speech genre has a profound impact on the meaning of the utterance and on the composition of the dialogue itself; what the speaker says in her choice of speech genre is as much a part of the dialogue as what she intends to mean by the utterance within that genre, and indeed, interlocutors *always speak in concrete speech genres*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), esp. 83-131, and also, for an excellent summary of major theories in language and identity, see José Medina, *Language: Key Concepts in Philosophy* (London, UK: Continuum, 2005), 168-180.

<sup>11</sup> See See Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in *Art and Answerability*, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 4-256.

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*. One can already see the threat to communicative freedom when highly regulative (and regulated) speech genres limit the individual's capacity to self-orient, to assert oneself as a bearer of the right to accept or to reject the truth, sincerity, or rightness of the utterance act.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 78: “Even in the most free, the most unconstrained conversation, we cast our speech in definite generic forms, sometimes rigid and trite ones, sometimes more flexible, plastic, and creative ones.” Also,

Consequently, the utterance achieves its answerability<sup>14</sup>—its status as an ethical claim on the subject—solely in the context of speech genre. But the fact that every utterance occurs within recognizable genres of speech does not undermine the subject’s communicative freedom; on the contrary, it underscores that freedom: an utterance is that act alone by means of which speech genres cohere as an object of analysis; it is in this act that genres receive re-articulation and re-iteration, and thus subjects have the capacity to “re-signify” genres of speech in more or less enabling ways for interlocutors in context. Therefore, because subjects constitute dialogue as a tense sphere of contestable meaning, speech genres *as such* cannot be presupposed to have more than tentatively legitimate status in dialogue--that is, speech genres choices take on the status of contestable validity claims. Recognition of another's utterance act, then, must involve recognition of the other's capacity for re-orienting dialogue toward renewing and altering the components of speech genres. If interlocutors are to recognize one another as truly capable of accepting or rejecting validity claims (per Habermas), then they must also maintain sensitivity to the speech genres in use, specifically with regard to the more or less enabling capacity of the genres to allow for the participants' self-determination in terms of their speech choices.<sup>15</sup>

Thus while subjects use the norms (genres) of communication in different social and institutional spheres to inform their utterance choices, these norms depend as well on situated, intersubjectively achieved patterns of speech action in particular dialogues. Interlocutors, then,

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in Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982), 293: “[T]here are no ‘neutral’ words and forms [...] Language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency [...] Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life.”

<sup>14</sup> See Michael Holquist, "Answering as Authoring: Mikhail Bakhtin's Trans-Linguistics," *Critical Theory* 10 (1983): 307-319.

<sup>15</sup> Here I mean the ability to realize one's fundamental valuational stances from a position of uncoerced self-identification within the word as well as the intersubjectivity of dialogue itself.

always interact within a co-created (and hence contestable) semiotic space on the basis of which the very grounds for selecting one or another genre of speech remains open to the same scrutiny as any other qualified validity claim. Communicative freedom, then, means also the freedom to assert alternative speech genres – those outside the grasp of the purportedly neutral atmosphere of Habermasian communicative interaction – in order to challenge the authority of heretofore presupposed genres of speech to facilitate the communicative freedom of just this particular subject in this particular context. Thus the subject takes an active stance in dialogue:

communicative freedom must allow the subject a bearing in the utterance act as a re-articulator of speech genre, as one who can therefore influence generic norms.

### **The Normativity of Speech-Genre Attunement**

On Bakhtin's view, when interlocutors participate in dialogue they assume an active stance; they always anticipate a rejoinder from the other. Even “from the speaker's first word,” he says, the listener begins to agree or disagree, to augment or apply it.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, this responsive take consists both in the bodily response (perhaps in silence), in the utterance act, and in the action which “answering” the utterance act entails (e.g., following a command). The important thing to note is that, because there is no clear dichotomy between “speaker” and “hearer”—that is, because “from the first word” (or even before) we anticipate the speaker's take on the speech genre and already, in a sense, begin to speak ourselves—one's choice of speech genre has a major effect on the other's subsequent speech choices. Interlocutors delimit together the space within which any utterance act can be said to assert a legitimately criticizable validity claims. Constitutive of such an interaction, then, is the realization that one's speech-generic choices carry *ethical weight*. By accepting this demand, remaining receptive to the alteration of the three main components of speech genres, interlocutors show their concern for the ways in

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<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 68.

which their own speech affects the other. From such a stance, moreover, they effectively demonstrate an openness to radically new forms (or even reversals) of speech norms and thus to the unrestricted self-positing of the other. Such openness, however, requires more than simply allowing the other a “place at the table,” as Habermas would have it; subjects also maintain empathy or affective attunement to the other’s experience. (In Searle's formal pragmatic terms, they respect the other's life experience as the ground for the very possibility of subjectivity in the lifeworld).<sup>17</sup>

Bakhtin introduces this inherent vulnerability to (and of) the other in language in his discussion of the “double-voiced” word: the utterance act incorporates both the subject’s voice and the imagined voice of the other.<sup>18</sup> Therefore both external and internal dialogues involve a juxtaposition of opposites, of conflicting meanings and value-stances, he says, such that in every voice there are “two contending voices,” there is “confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously;” every experience is “accompanied by a continual sideways glance at another person.”<sup>19</sup> This easily intuited idea, that communication involves at least two agents—whether imagined and anticipated (e.g., when authoring a written work) or tangible and “accessible” as in spoken dialogue—who affect one another's choice of word and mode of articulation of the same, reveals the power of speakers in context. If words are “double-voiced,” then one's choice of

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<sup>17</sup> For Searle, the Background is the set of abilities, capacities, tendencies, and dispositions that humans have and that are not in themselves intentional states. The Network involves the beliefs, desires, and other intentions necessary for any particular intentional state to make sense. This parallels Bourdieu's *habitus*, the internalized schemata, sensibilities, dispositions, and taste acquired by a particular subject in a particular lifeworld. See also Merleau-Ponty, “The Sensible World and the World of Expression,” in *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France: 1952-1960* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970) for a summary discussion of the body as “expression” of the symbolic in the lifeworld, from a phenomenological perspective.

<sup>18</sup> GSM & CE, *Bakhtin*, esp. 139-159.

<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin, *PDP*, 32.

speech genre affects more than just the discourse trajectory: choosing words (from, e.g., a common vs. esoteric vocabulary) and modes of articulation (e.g., a satirical vs. solemn gesture) shapes the other's capacity for speaking from a position of non-coerced subjective potentiality; thus these choices call subjects into dialogue in a thoroughly subjectivating way.

Bakhtin brings to our attention the ways in which interlocutors inaugurate a space for another's free self-assertion in his discussion of the author-hero relationship: interlocutors bring life to one another in much the same way as the author uses the "addressive surplus" to ask the right sorts of questions, probing the other in sympathetic attunement to the other's open potentiality of being (but strictly *not* through embodying the other in empathetic self-negation; only from this position of "outsideness" do we articulate for one another the ways in which our speech appears in reciprocal relation to another's: thus through active listening or "live entering," interlocutors recognize the other's "capacity for change ... the subject "provokes or invites" the other "to reveal and outgrow himself."<sup>20</sup> This relationship acknowledges that no one but the subject herself has the capacity to signify her being as an open involvement within a unique perspectival understanding of the situation; thus the subject alone has her own last word. The life of this kind of dialogue presupposes the freedom of all subjects to assert a particular understanding over and above the requirements of heretofore presupposed modes of communication.

Mutually cognitive dialogue, I would suggest, implicates subjects in this same kind of relationship, whereby speech genres themselves acquire the status of criticizable validity claims: interlocutors join in a "fundamental plurality of unmerged consciousnesses"<sup>21</sup> irreducible to any

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<sup>20</sup>GSM & CE, *Bakhtin*, 242.

<sup>21</sup>Bakhtin, *PDP*, 9.

abstract medium or permanently consensual genre of speech. Precisely because these multiple voices each have their own power to signify, they cannot be understood from the perspective of a third-person, and thus that third-person (on this reading, a speech genre, a relatively stable semantic framework) is as immanently involved in the dialogue as the characters. Therefore, as a precondition for entering a dialogic relationship of mutual recognition, a subject must assume responsibility as a participatory consciousness, one who recognizes that there is “no alibi in being;”<sup>22</sup> subjects accept their ownmost capacity to affect, in a more or less enabling way, the ability of the other to maintain a non-coercive space for self-assertion. Interlocutors, then, make room not only for new linguistic content but also for new ways of expressing that content. They don’t simply recognize the presuppositions of communicative interaction; nor do they simply acknowledge the basic situation that each occupies on her own as an agent with a unique life history. Equally important is that they recognize one another as authors of speech genres, the choice of which effectively reveals the *immanent effects* of one’s speech on the other. That is, speakers continue to pick up on the slight nuances of speech which occur as the result of the subject’s casting of her speech in a particular genre. Sensitivity thus demands listening and vulnerability to the other<sup>23</sup>—indeed, one’s success in reaching mutual understanding here would depend on assuming such a position. Thus interlocutors choose a speech genre in anticipation of the perlocutionary effects<sup>24</sup> such a choice will have on the other’s sense of her own ability to continue dialogue as an uncoercively reflective and volitional subject.

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<sup>22</sup>See Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, ed. by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. by Vadim Liapunov (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Recognition would involve this kind of openness as the first and foremost constituent of dialogue—i.e., as prior to language.

<sup>24</sup> That is, the effects considered to be derivative of but not inherent to comprehension of a speech act. See Medina, *Language: Key Concepts in Philosophy*, 25, for a clarification of the distinction between

Here we can see the ways in which a conformist approach to a dialogue between, e.g., a doctor and a patient may restrict the openness of one or the other participant (or both) to the self's own freedom to articulate speech that addresses what is *really important* to the self in such an interaction. Clearly, such restrictive interchange is not really dialogue in Bakhtin's sense of the word. True dialogue depends on all participants sharing the conviction that through their speech they help to identify (to constitute) and restructure the other's sense of herself. The implication is that before, during, and after interlocutors mutually recognize the Habermasian presuppositions, they assume active positions as co-creators of a dialogue which to a greater or lesser degree engages the other as a subject constituting and constituted by the intersubjective meeting, an essential component of which is the continual positing, negotiating, and re-positing of speech genres: sensitivity to speech genre choice is necessary for subjects to really recognize each other.

Because interlocutors take a responsive stance toward (within) utterance acts, responses to the utterance will be mediated through the speech genre deployed in the act. Speakers choose genres knowing that the other's response will differ qualitatively from the response evoked by a different choice of genre. Speech genres can be more or less enabling, then, not only because they may presuppose a power relation between the participants—as in the dialogue of doctor and patient—but also because these same genres have in themselves more or less flexibility. That is, the genres at play in a dialogue between doctor and patient may be more or less flexible than those in a dialogue between, for example, parent and child. If interlocutors are to facilitate mutual understanding in dialogue, then they must recognize the implications of choosing one genre over another. A major consequence of this line of reasoning is that, because subjects call

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illocutionary and perlocutionary effects. See also Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, 122-129, for an exposition on Austin's original distinction between these two communicative effects with regard to the different motivations interlocutors assume in the speech act.

one another out into dialogue, it is not enough simply to “accept” or to “tolerate” the other's speech. Here it will help to think of the ambiguous claim of the affluent subject implicitly asserting her rejection of classism while in dialogue with an impoverished subject. Of course, such a conversation would present numerous challenges to both speakers upfront because of differing cultural and linguistic histories, and thus differing points of reference in the creation of one or the other's narrative telling of her (life-) story, all of which is predicated (in this example) on the subjects' varying socioeconomic circumstances. But to the point, the affluent subject can take an implicit position of acceptance or tolerance which displaces her ethical burden onto a presuppositional (and thus unreflective) role, à la the speech genre in play, which determines what “should” happen (what one should say) in this case for “recognition” to be satisfied; there is, constitutive of this dialogue, reference to a presupposed rule of speech-conduct that transgresses both Habermasian and Bakhtinian requirements for mutually recognitive dialogue. The false “Other”<sup>25</sup> onto which her speech burden—the raw burden of the confrontation of affluence and poverty—is displaced allows her to rationalize thus: “we have different priorities and we speak in different ways, but I will try to understand because I am a fair person,” without actually accepting the consequences of allowing herself to be vulnerable to the experience of the other's disadvantaged subjective position.

Once this position has been taken, the affluent subject accepts a passive reception of the other's speech in order to understand the basic (de-subjectivized) semantics of the utterances at hand, for perhaps no more than pragmatic reasons.<sup>26</sup> The affluent subject might accept this kind

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<sup>25</sup> See Slavoj Žižek "Only a Suffering God Can Save Us: Section 2: Kierkegaard," EBSCO Publishing, 2007, <http://www.lacan.com/zizmarqueemoon.html>, for a psychoanalytic interpretation of this "displacement" of subjective burden.

<sup>26</sup> This argument should be helpful for discussing race relations, political debate, interfaith dialogue, etc.

of position in order to protect herself from the perceived diminution of her own subjective power at the hands of the impoverished subject. The impoverished subject could, in the right kind of dialogue, pull the affluent subject into a meaningful dialogue of a kind totally unfamiliar (and possibly threatening) to her. In this sense the affluent subject's position is a rejection of the responsibility to recognize oneself as accountable for one's speech-generic choice in the *co*-creation of meaning, of one's self- and other-constituting activity. As Greg Nielson puts it, for Bakhtin, "subjects are as responsible for themselves as they are for others ... [R]esponsibility is not a formal requirement nor is it constituted by a simple empathy toward the other."<sup>27</sup> It is, rather, a recognition of the failure of one's own embodied, situated perspective to account for the unique subjective experience of the other; one cannot presuppose understanding simply on the basis of rational communicative "agreement": the double-voiced word implicates the other's purely subjective bearing in the utterance as the subject's *own act*. Responsibility thus manifests in dialogue, says Nielson, as "a kind of living into ... the utterance based on the anticipation of rejoinder from the listener and the shared responsibility that develops from the background of the social diversity of speech."<sup>28</sup>

Looking at the dialogic interaction in this light allows us to see why choosing "acceptance" and "tolerance" allows the subject to feign understanding and avoid doing the hard work of communication; such a resistance is a far cry from the activity of Bakhtin's speaking subject who, as the author for the hero, establishes and re-works for the other an "extremely complex and subtle atmosphere that would force him to reveal and explain himself dialogically,

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<sup>27</sup>Nielson, Greg. "Bakhtin and Habermas: Toward a Transcultural Ethics." *Theory and Society* 24 (1995): 820.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 821.

to catch aspects of himself in others' consciousnesses, to build loopholes for himself."<sup>29</sup> At the individual level, utterance acts, cast in the traditional speech genres, overreach the boundaries—the thematic, stylistic, and structural components—of those same genres. Introducing even minimally different thematic content, subjective style, or patterns of finalization, then, alters what one comes to assume to be the standard way of speaking in a certain context.<sup>30</sup>

Here I have suggested that, because Habermas' theory of communicative action lacks a precise account of the meaning of the utterance act as it plays out in speech genres, he is unable to reveal the existential implications for subjects in dialogue. Bakhtin's work is our best source for understanding these issues in a sophisticated manner. It is my claim that communicative freedom must include the ability to delimit, in a creative and pragmatic way, speech-generic forms. The individual in a truly recognitive relationship is only able to adopt a legitimate position from which to respect the other if that same individual accepts responsibility for her positing of speech acts through concrete speech genres. These generic forms, then, stay open to question, open for dialogue, allowing the tripartite structure of speech genres—their thematic, stylistic, and compositional elements—to emphasize for interlocutors in context a revisionary account of the ethical responsivity inherent in communicative interaction.

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<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin, *PDP*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> See discussions of the critical potential of publics oriented toward the grotesque and stylistically altered forms of communication crucial for a Bakhtinian approach to dialogue and narrative in *Beyond Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, eds. Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

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