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Hybridity

Hybridity is one of those concepts in cultural studies that have undergone transfer, not only between theories but also, strikingly, between disciplines, from biology to the philosophy of language, whence it was then adopted by cultural and post-colonial studies. Hence it is used in the analysis of language, genres and identities as well as plants, animals and cultures (Kapchan and Strong 1999).

In cultural studies, hybridity is always discussed with reference to Mikhail M. Bakhtin's use of the term. Homi Bhabha, for instance, points to the work of Bakhtin when he describes hybridity as a characteristic of language and culture. Bhabha describes hybridity as a "'third space' which enables other positions to emerge" (Rutherford 1990, 211). Here, he relates the processes of hybridisation not only to language but also to practices of colonisation, which he considers to involve reciprocal processes of appropriation giving rise to a hybrid third quality, the 'third space', belonging to neither the colonised nor the colonised culture.

Bakhtin was yet to be concerned with such third spaces when he spent just nine pages examining linguistic hybridity in his essay "Slovo v romane" ("Discourse in the Novel"), in which he made the distinction between hybridity and the verbs 'to mix' (*smeshivat'sia*), 'to cross' (*skreshchivat'sia*) or 'intersect' (*peresekat'sia*) in language. For in the 1920s and 1930s, hybridisation is principally a term used in botany and eugenics, although it also features in discussions concerning mechanical or organic philosophies of language and formalist or creative theories of heredity. In the individual sciences, the term hybridity is used either to discuss the creation of something new, a third thing, by crossing existing things (as in eugenics or botany) or to describe the evolution of language as a natural or organic process of mixing or crossing (as in linguistics). A constructivist hybridisation that interferes with nature thus complements a natural, organic hybridity.

Bakhtin too participated in this discussion. In "Discourse in the Novel", he asks what hybridisation can mean in the sphere of language: it is "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, within two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation [...]" (Bakhtin 1981, 358). He had already discussed the encounter between two linguistic consciousnesses in his work on dialogism. Scholars often claim that Bakhtin actually used dialogism and hybridity synonymously (Babich 1998, 41). But in fact the two concepts are distinct from one another. We speak of dialogism when two linguistic consciousnesses are not merged or mixed – that is, when, as Bakhtin puts it, "only one language is actually present in the utterance, but it is rendered *in the light*

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of another language" (Bakhtin 1981, 362). This second language, he continues, remains outside of the utterance. It is merely referred to, resonating in the utterance – hence the term polyphony – but it is not usurped by it; the two are not mixed.

For Bakhtin, hybridisation is something else; here there is an actual mixture, a new, inseparable combination. Bakhtin makes the fundamental distinction between an "unintentional, unconscious" ("nenamerennaia bessoznatel'naia", Bakhtin 1981, 358) hybridisation and one that is conscious and intentional. "Unintentional, unconscious" hybridisation is "one of the most important modes in the historical life and evolution of all languages" (Bakhtin 1981, 358). While the hybrids emerging from the process of linguistic evolution are double-voiced, they are nevertheless monologic; this hybridity contains a mixture of two "*individualized* language consciousnesses (the correlates of two specific utterances, not merely two languages)" (Bakhtin 1981, 359).

The artistic hybrid, on the other hand, is produced intentionally and consciously. It is double-voiced – that is, dialogic – for here the mixture involves two individualised and no longer impersonal linguistic consciousnesses, two standpoints, he argues. Artistic hybridity is dialogicised, then; there is no unconscious mixing, but an encounter and a battle on the territory of the utterance. Elsewhere too, Bakhtin uses metaphors of combat to describe the dialogic; in "Discourse in the Novel", he even adds: "Two points of view are not mixed, but set against each other dialogically" (Bakhtin 1981, 360).

Here, Bakhtin quite consciously 'combines', then, the dialogic and the hybrid. His notion of artistic hybridity has little to do with the use of the term in botany, in which two different entities create a third with hereditary traits of both. Even when Bakhtin uses the terms 'to cross' or 'to intersect', it is never to connote 'to mix'. Bakhtin thus also establishes that in Dostoevskii's novels, at least two voices can always be heard despite the crossing and entanglement of voices and consciousnesses: "In every voice he [Dostoevskii] could hear two contending voices [...]" (Bakhtin 1984, 30).

Bakhtin's concept of hybridity seems to have been influenced not so much by botanical processes as by a discussion in linguistics and aesthetics – between the phenomenologist Gustav Shpet and the linguist and philologist Viktor Vinogradov, who were themselves influenced by Wilhelm Humboldt's philosophy of language. Both Vinogradov und Shpet use the term hybridity in the context of a discussion about style in the novel, specifically the special artistic quality of the word in the novel. In *Vnutrenniaia forma slova* (1927, *The Inner Form of the Word*), Shpet criticised Humboldt's distinction between prose and poetry, objecting that Humboldt "sanctions the hybrid nature of 'artistic prose'" (Shpet 2007, 458). Shpet argued that it was hybrid because Humboldt assumed that both artistic prose and

poetry take reality as their starting point, although for Shpet a clear distinction can indeed be made between the two genres, one being based on reality and the other on possibility.

After reading Shpet, Bakhtin used the term hybridity, but lent it more positive connotations. For Bakhtin, the novel is no longer a negatively connoted hybrid of the prosaic and poetic word; rather, every word, even if used rhetorically, proves to be hybrid or, in its poetic usage, dialogised, fusing two clearly distinct standpoints, accents or voices in one single utterance.

While Shpet tends to use hybridity with more negative connotations, similarly to how biology used the term from the late eighteenth century onwards to denote the combination of two originally different species or pure breeds, at no point does Bakhtin postulate original identity or purity. Quite on the contrary, he explicitly stresses that hybridisation in language is an organic, natural process and that linguistic evolution also occurs principally via hybridisation, via a creative process in which the utterance serves as a "crucible for this mixing" ("kraterom dlia smesheniia", Bakhtin 1981, 359).

This positive re-semanticisation of the concept of hybridity, begun by Bakhtin and later emphasized by post-colonial studies, does not have anything to do with a loss of original purity; rather, it denotes difference, correlation and co-existence – dialogism in Bakhtin's sense of the term. Referring to cultural processes, Bhabha reads Bakhtin's concept of conscious, intentional hybridity as a subversive practice, as a form of resistance to colonial rule. However, Bakhtin himself does not go as far as that, at least not explicitly, although he would have had every reason to do so with regard to cultural development in the Soviet Union. Rather, he seeks to demonstrate that artistic practices of hybridisation do not ignore organic hybridisation or free themselves from it in a secondary process; they are intended to *depict* it. Bakhtin writes that the artistic hybrid – the semantic hybrid, produces a picture of language as an organic hybrid. The use of language is thus a constant demonstration of the process of hybridisation that can be made visible in artistic language: "Thus there are always two consciousnesses, two language-intentions, two *voices* and consequently two accents participating in an intentional and artistic hybrid" (Bakhtin 1981, 360).

This is taken a step further by Valentin Voloshinov, who had already pointed to theories of hybridisation in linguistics in 1929, in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Voloshinov was referring to Nikolai Marr's theory of the crossing of languages, then very much the standard doctrine in the Soviet Union. Marr was of the opinion that languages do not diverge as in the family tree model but are merely crossed with one another, thereby generating new languages (Marr 1926, 268). Voloshinov cites Marr's theory in opposing European linguistics and semasiology: "Formalism and systematicity are the typical distinguishing marks of any kind of

thinking focused on a ready-made and, so to speak, arrested object" (Voloshinov 1973, 78). Marr, in contrast, understood crossing as "the source for the formation of new species" (Marr, quoted in Voloshinov 1973, 76) and established that there was no such thing as an original national or mother tongue anyway. In this understanding, *crossing* (*skreshchenie*) is the key to all theories on the origins of language. Here Voloshinov subscribes, then, to the theory of a pre-existing hybridity of language. On the other hand, Voloshinov does not come to the conclusion that was reached by Marr and that particularly appealed to Stalin – namely that crossing the languages in communist society would result in a single language (Voloshinov 1973, 76). Voloshinov rather uses Marr's language against himself, since hybridisation results in a multiplicity of standpoints – that is, in ambivalence and difference – as Bakhtin would later put it with greater clarity.

Hybridisation is also examined by formalist literary theory, albeit marginally. Shklovskii writes of the fallacy and nonsense of crossing as an artistic practice, particularly of genres, by citing an example from biology: "A black rabbit breeding with a white rabbit doesn't create a grey rabbit, rather [they come in a series], first a white one, then a black one" (Shklovskii 1990, 349). It is the same with genres: it is not the case that any number of genres emerge, nor can all genres be crossed with one another. Shklovskii opposes crossing because he too thinks of it as mixing and argues for confrontation, for a collision of elements that allows their origin and the peculiarity of their descent to remain visible.

In essence, Voloshinov, Bakhtin and Shklovskii do not vastly differ in their scepticism towards crossing:

> There are not any number of literary genres. Just as the chemical elements do allow all bonding but only that which is simple and divisible and just as there are not different types of rye but only known ways of processing it, different treatments creating certain types, and just as there is not any amount of oil but only a certain amount, there are also a certain number of genres that are connected to a certain crystallography of the subject matter. (Shklovskii 1990, 349)

Bakhtin also thinks of hybridisation in the aesthetic sphere not as mixing but as dialogical and confrontational. Just as for Shklovskii the individual elements should remain visible, for Bakhtin too the individual voices remain audible; they do not merge into a monological voice. Despite their different premises, Bakhtin and Shklovskii are united by similar positions: they categorically reject hybridisation conceived as mixing.

Translated by John Heath

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