# The separation of voices in a literary utterance:

## a dialogical approach to discourse presentation, viewpoint, focalization – and punctuation.

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## Abstract

Punctuation, an often invisible, but necessary element of written communication, needs to be studied and integrated into a larger understanding of written communication. This paper presents a case study of one of the functions of punctuation: the separation and expression of voices. The study shows that an awareness of punctuation can widen our understanding of discourse presentation and viewpoint, and how we are able, in silent reading, to disentangle the complex interplay of voices in a novel. A dialogical, Bakhtin-influenced approach is taken, and presented as potentially useful to many stylistic studies. Using the "sociological stylistics" approach that the Bakhtin circle promoted, linguistic details are studied in the utterances they belong to. The results can contribute to our understanding of writing as interaction as well as of stylistic and narrative techniques. Dialogical and interactional perspectives on the language of novels can create spaces for interdisciplinary insights, and integrate our understanding of text and context.

## 1    Introduction

The role of punctuation in writing, and specifically in fictional writing, has been meagrely treated in stylistic research, even if interest in this topic seems to be slowly increasing (cf. Lennard 2011). More and more, linguists and literary scholars are becoming aware of the importance of material and visual aspects of texts; for instance, Nørgaard (e.g. 2009) and Gibbons (2012) have worked within what they call "multimodal stylistics", combining stylistic methodology and terminology with sociosemiotic models, to gain a more holistic understanding of literary meaning-making. However, punctuation often seems to end up in a grey area and remain unexplored as a linguistic and stylistic element. For the most part, the punctuation of texts is taken for granted by readers and researchers alike despite the obvious fact that we rely heavily on punctuation for our written communication. Because of its usual invisibility, it is necessary to put punctuation specifically in focus in research, in order to be able to integrate it into a larger understanding of written communication. The case study presented in this article is meant to be a small contribution to this.

In a previous study[1], I discerned three general functions of punctuation: *separation* (linear and spatial structuring), *articulation* (expressivity) and *iconicity* (visual mimicry of an auditive or visual impression). These functions overlap and are often combined. A large part of the separation group consisted of instances where either the viewpoint[2], setting, or discourse mode was shifting, and where punctuation occurred precisely where the shift took place. Often, it seemed like these shifts would have been difficult to perceive without the guiding punctuation. Despite the rigid framework for understanding discourse presentation, viewpoint, and focalization, something was clearly missing. Firstly, the role of punctuation was most often ignored (with a few interesting exceptions, such as Short 1999). Secondly, these phenomena were not put in the larger perspective of the conditions of written communication. The regular voice shifts in the text I studied were often not the least bit exceptional or 'literary'; they seemed to be necessary and ordinary communicative acts.

Few stylisticians seem to have used the theories of the Bakhtin circle[3]; but in *When voices clash* (1999), Mey shows how phenomena that are often called *viewpoint*, *discourse presentation*, *narrative mode*, and *focalization* can be studied from a Bakhtinian perspective and understood as *voice management*. Both Mey's study and Bakhtin's own work show that the concept of voice can be extremely useful for describing and understanding some of the intricate communicative work that writers and readers can perform with punctuation. Linell (e.g. 2009) draws heavily on Bakhtin's work in his interactional revision of language theory, which he labels "dialogical linguistics". In my research, then, I use Bakhtin's dialogical theories, Mey's applications of them within literary pragmatics, and Linell's linguistic applications of them, to describe the workings of punctuation and writing systems generally, and specifically the complex voice management in the novels I study. As Mey (1999:95) states:

> It is and remains important to discover linguistic evidence for the claims that are made about narrative technique, about how narration proceeds, and how it is structured, in particular with regard to what I call the 'management of voice'.

Mey points out that this evidence has to be found in the narrative text itself, and not in the mind of the linguist constructing examples. This paper, then, will focus on voice management in the novel *Förvandling* ('transformation', 2005) by Eva Adolfsson, and use the Bakhtinian dialogical perspective to explore things that on the one hand are very complex, but that we still, as readers, perform so naturally that they are often taken for granted. More specifically, I will use the concept of voice and the concept of the change of speech subject within the novel in my description of how voices shift in writing. I am taking a dialogical, non-structuralist linguistic approach to the question of discourse presentation and viewpoint, and I focus on the visual surface level of writing, the graphological level (Leech & Short 2007:104), which has often been completely overlooked by literary scholars and linguists alike. However, I do not understand this as a separate, 'paratextual' level, but as integrated with, and impossible to understand without, the levels of grammar and lexicon.

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[1] Published in Dahl (2013) and presented at the Pala Conference in Malta, July 2012.
[2] Like Short (1999) and others, I prefer the more general term viewpoint to the widely used but slightly problematic and often unnecessary term *focalization* (see also Björklund 1993).
[3] Roger Fowler (1977, 1986) being one of a small number of exceptions.

## 2   Methodology

As already mentioned, this study was preceded by a more general study of the functions of punctuation. In that study, I closely read three contemporary Swedish novels and noted all the functions that punctuation seemed to have in them – deviant as well as non-deviant. Because of the lack of a coherent theory about punctuation, based on empirical studies, I found it necessary not to use a pre-existent model but to take an explorative, qualitative approach, though this was informed by the important works by Parkes (1992), Lennard (e.g. 2000), and others.

In the next stage of the analysis, I grouped the instances and searched for patterns, asking what structural patterns punctuation was creating in these novels.[4] While my main interest was not in the interpretation of these specific novels, but in the role and potential of punctuation more generally, I also recognized the importance of literary interpretation as a way towards this goal. In my readings, I shifted between different roles: the role of the systematic qualitative researcher as well as the role of the implied reader, understood as the preferred reader role, a position vis-à-vis the text where the reader is active in realising the meaning potential of the text (cf. Iser 1975; Mey 1999:272).

To discern the different voices in the present study, I have used Edmiston's (1989) model of internal focalization in first person narration, and Björklund's (1993) alternative to the focalization model. Even more important, however, is the Bakhtinian concept of *voice*. This notion is essential in Bakhtinian theory. According to Bakhtin, language is alive and dialogic in concrete and embodied utterances. Every linguistic unit is part of a concrete utterance, uttered by someone in a specific situation, genre and context. This is so fundamental that if we consider these units out of context, out of the utterance, they can hardly even be called linguistic (Bakhtin & Medvedev 1978:94). All this is true also in the novel; so, for instance, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, Bakhtin (1984:184) notes that we attribute all that we read to an author, someone "whose position it expresses", and to whom we, through the reading process, respond:

> Every utterance in this sense has its author, whom we hear in the very utterance as its creator. Of the real author, as he exists outside the utterance, we can know absolutely nothing at all. And the forms of this real authorship can be very diverse. A given work can be the product of a collective effort, it can be created by the successive efforts of generations, and so forth— but in all cases we hear in it a unified creative will, a definite position, to which it is possible to react dialogically. A dialogic reaction personifies every utterance to which it responds.

The process of reading is, thus, always active and interactive. However, Bakhtin also noted and described various forms of polyphony, especially in the novel. In both 'Problem of speech genres' (1986) and *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (1984), Bakhtin noted that an author can use quotation marks to signal a voice shift or to "lend expressivity"; in 'Problem of Speech genres', he compared this with how we use intonation in speech. The utterance is framed by the change of speech subject; in this respect, the novel is treated as one utterance (Bakhtin 1986:76). But at the same time, this utterance is filled with speaking subjects. Bakhtin (1986:92) writes:

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[4] I did *not* ask what 'governed' the punctuation, since, following Bakhtin's language theories, I do not consider language acts as instantiations of a system, but as continuously generating their own structure (see e.g. Linell 2009).

> Intonation that isolates others' speech (in written speech, designated by quotation marks) is a special phenomenon: it is as though the *change of speech subjects* has been internalized.

If this phenomenon is to be described as utterances within utterances or not is not stated in Bakhtin's text and thus open for discussion; here, I have chosen to describe the change of speech subject within the utterance as a *voice shift*. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, Bakhtin himself actually uses, not quotation marks, but italics, when quoting, to make it clearer to the reader where in the quoted text Dostoevsky's voice shifts take place.

## 3    Analysis

The novel *Förvandling* was published in Sweden in 2005, by the well-established author and critic Eva Adolfsson (1942–2010). The reception of the novel was mixed, though mostly positive. For my purpose, the novel was interesting because several newspaper reviews remarked on its punctuation, which implied that in this novel, there was no doubt that punctuation was a stylistically relevant factor. In particular, Adolfsson's use of exclamation points, suspension points, and dashes, was noted, as it has been in several other novels by this author. Some of the critics were sceptical, considering the extensive use of these marks messy or annoying; others perceived the rich use of different punctuation marks as an interesting part of the novel's style and narration.

Below is an excerpt from a long sentence in *Förvandling*, and in it we see several shifts in voice. As already mentioned, the analysis is based on an understanding of the novel as a whole. From a Bakhtinian perspective, this sort of analysis could not be done by a researcher or any reader who has merely seen an excerpt in isolation. The novel's protagonist is a single woman living in a suburb outside of Stockholm in the 1980s. The novel is set during her pregnancy. A minor part of it tells about her meeting a former lover, who is now working as a school doctor in the same suburb. Here, she has decided that she wants to ask him out.

> [I] let my feet turn in to the schoolyard and see all the children staring wide-eyed at my enormous body proceeding towards the front door (is there anything stranger than a school building you've never entered before?), walk up the stairs to find a door with the sign SCHOOL DOCTOR and step inside and speak to a woman who says that yes, he is working here, but not today, and I write a note *can we have lunch one more time*.
>      Dear God!
>
> [låter mina fötter svänga in på skolgården och ser alla barn stirra rundögt på min väldiga kropp som färdas framåt mot entrédörren (finns det något mer främmande än en aldrig förr besökt skolbyggnad?), går uppför trappan och hittar en dörr med skylten SKOLLÄKARE och stiger in och talar med en kvinna som säger att jo, han är i tjänst, men inte i dag, och skriver en lapp *kan vi äta lunch en gång till*.
>      Herregud!]                                   Eva Adolfsson: *Förvandling*. (2005) p. 169.[5]

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[5] This novel has not been published in English; the quoted English text is thus in my own translation, made exclusively for this paper and purpose. It would, however, be very interesting to compare a text as dense with voices as this one with its published translation into another language (cf. Tammi & Tommola 2006).

Reading aloud, we change our intonation to show the change of speech subject within an utterance. As Parkes (1992) has shown, punctuation first evolved as a tool for rhetoricians reading aloud. But since then, writing has become an independent form of communication, and reading is now normally a silent activity. A part of silent-reading competence seems to involve the silent discerning of different voices. We understand who says what in the excerpt above just by reading it with our eyes. In my analysis, five different speech subjects, or *voices*, are at hand in this short excerpt, as shown below in Figure 1.

| Narrating self | Experiencing self | Door sign | Woman | Written note |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| [I] let my feet turn in to the schoolyard and see all the children staring wide-eyed at my enormous body proceeding towards the front door | | | | |
| | (is there anything stranger than a school building you've never entered before?), | | | |
| walk up the stairs to find a door with the sign | | | | |
| | | SCHOOL DOCTOR | | |
| and step inside and speak to a woman who says that | | | | |
| | | | yes, he is working here, but not today | |
| , and I write a note | | | | |
| | | | | *can we have lunch one more time.* |
| | Dear God! | | | |

*Figure 1. Different voices in one sentence.*

Some of the voices take part in the inner dialogue of the narrator, or between the narrating self and the experiencing self (cf. Edmiston 1989) – the latter of which, in this case, could also be called a meta-narrating self – while some take part in an outer dialogue in the fictional world. One voice is speaking (Woman), two are writing (Door sign + Note), one is thinking (Experiencing self), and one narrating.

So how come this advanced voice management can take place in writing, and how do we manage to understand it in silent reading? Bakhtin claimed, as we just read, that it is possible, with the help of quotation marks. Here, however, there is not a single quotation mark. Instead, the shifts in this quote are signalled (and co-created by us as active readers) through:

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- Parenthesis marks, when the experiencing I is interrupting the narration in mid-sentence with a parallel comment, combined with a question mark indicating the comment's expressivity
- Capital letters and italics, giving the words a visually iconic aspect, making them imitate other written texts, in the fictive world: a door sign and a written note (cf. Nørgaard 2009)
- Verba dicendi: a clause explicitly saying that what follows is direct speech (combined with a comma at the end of the quote)
- Paragraph break and exclamation mark, in the case of the shift of voice or tone in the next sentence.

Another sort of shift in voice or viewpoint, signalled by paragraph break combined with an asterisk, is found repeatedly in the novel. Below is an example from p. 120. Before the blank lines and the asterisk, the voice is shifting between the narrating self and the experiencing self. After them, Mrs Svan is taking on the role of experiencer (cf. Björklund 1995). In the chapter in question, this tool is used repeatedly to change the focalization – or, as Jacob Mey would say, the voice or *vocalization* – between the experiencing self and other characters in the novel. Both the self and Mrs Svan are writers reflecting on writing, and they are neighbours, but they are completely different women, different in age, with different opinions, and they do not have any close relationship in the novel.

> I'm on my way down the stairs with the folded blouse in a shopping bag when I hear the clatter of a typewriter. Who's writing? Andersson, Lundgren, Svan?
>
> Hard to imagine one of them writing. Maybe some lodger?
>
> *
>
> But it is Mrs Svan.
>
> She has changed the order of events – has boldly decided that's allowed! – and is now on the first love story.
>
> [Medan jag går nerför trappan med blusen hopvikt i sin påse hör jag det där skrivmaskinsknattret. Vem skriver? Andersson, Lundgren, Svan?
>
> Svårt att föreställa sig att någon av dem skriver. Kanske någon inneboende?
>
> *
> Men det är ju fru Svan.
>
> Hon har kastat om tidsföljden – har djärvt beslutat att det är tillåtet! – och är vid den första kärlekshistorien.]
>
> Eva Adolfsson: *Förvandling* (2005), p. 120.

There is something "unnatural", as the narratologists say, about this focalization of a character who is not the homodiegetic narrator. However, the text after the paragraph break and asterisk is clearly told not only by the narrator's own voice; Mrs Svan's voice is here influencing the narrator. The exclamation mark is hers, as are the insights into the chronology of her life story. The comment immediately following the asterisk and paragraph break helps us to navigate, but it is these marks that show where the shift takes place. Here, both location and voice are shifting. As Björklund (1995:171) points out, though, the characters never really speak for

themselves; rather, there is always a narrator there, who mimics the voices of others. If we hear "a unified will" in every literary utterance, as Bakhtin wrote, an overarching voice of the text producer, or, if we prefer, implied author, is always present. This means that when Mrs Svan's experiences are portrayed, it is because the narrator is putting herself in Mrs Svan's position as experiencer. Mrs Svan does not miraculously speak out directly from her own viewpoint; rather, we hear her voice – and the other characters who are taking the role as speaker, observer, or experiencer, including the experiencing self – as imagined and reproduced by the narrator.

Since the combination of paragraph break and asterisk is used repeatedly in this chapter, and only where this sort of voice shift takes place, its function is established and clear within the novel. Without it, the voice shifts would probably either be incomprehensible or be interpreted as more diffuse – which, in another context, could be stylistically relevant in itself. Apart from punctuation, there are obviously a number of different linguistic viewpoint markers, such as various deictics (see e.g. Fowler 1982, Mey 1999), but it is equally evident that punctuation often occurs exactly where the voice shifts take place, establishing itself as an important voice-management tool.

## 4   Conclusions

In this paper, I have shown how the concept of voice can be used in text analysis and shed light on the workings of linguistic details. I would like to suggest that the Bakhtinian framework provides insights that could be useful to many stylistic studies, not only those concerning punctuation, and that a dialogical approach, focusing on the concrete utterance as the fundamental linguistic unit, is necessary for understanding literary language as well as any language.

As we have seen in the two examples quoted above, punctuation draws on a variety of resources for different sorts of voice shifts. Determining the objective function of this or that sign is neither possible nor relevant, as the functions of individual signs are dynamic and overlapping. Instead, what is most important here is that these examples, which do not seem very exceptional or experimental, show that this level of the written is integrated in narration and language. Punctuation is not decoration, but a necessary element for structuring and making sense of what is written. (Neither is voice management the only function of punctuation.)

The study of punctuation in novels as literary interaction is something that I hope can promote a wider understanding of punctuation. As punctuation has been a necessary part of all written text in Western civilizations at least since the Middle Ages (Parkes 1992), I hope that my study can help develop our understanding not only of punctuation as such, but of the conditions for written communication more generally. In fact, we can probably not understand punctuation at all without incorporating it in an understanding of concrete written utterances.

It would also be very interesting to study voice management and punctuation in non-fiction texts. Academic texts, with previous and coming utterances constantly being interwoven with the present text, and with strict punctuation rules, especially with regards to quoting and referencing, would be intriguing to study from this perspective. Legal texts and newspaper reports are other genres with their own standards for presenting different voices through punctuation as well as other devices. Can we still claim, like Bakhtin did, that the novel is unique in its rich *heteroglossia*? In arguing for or against this claim, the visual surface of the text gives us evidence that should not be neglected, but rather needs to be further investigated.

Lastly, I want to emphasize that intonation and punctuation are *not* completely equivalent. There are important differences between speech and writing; their premises are in many ways different, and writing is *not* incompletely recorded speech, but an independent medium – though there are of course examples of genres that are in a way in-between, such as chat conversations and text messages. However, what Bakhtin states as the function of intonation in speech is related to at least one of the functions that punctuation has in writing. Punctuation can be used to express the character and materiality of both spoken and written voices. Being a writing-specific phenomenon, it can nevertheless diffuse our dichotomous ideas about writing and speech. Punctuation makes us listen with our eyes and read with ears and hands.

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