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Double-voicing: combining the uncombinable in an ideology rooted facebook exchange

Abstract:

‘Double-voicing’ is a term going back to the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin’s term of ‘double-voiced discourse’ or the orientation of one’s discourse toward both its referential object and someone else’s discourse, as found in everyday language as well as in literary narrative (with Dostoevsky’s oeuvre as a prototypical example). In more recent times, it has been applied to studying interpersonal, public and institutional communication from a perspective of social status negotiation in oral or written exchanges. Baxter (2014: 2) describes double-voicing as the more or less conscious adjustment of one’s language to interlocutors, usually comprising power related agendas such as deflecting threats and silencing someone else. These strategies are often tied to the construction of social categories as gender, age, ethnicity, profession and status. While concrete linguistic features as the use of politeness, hedging strategies, humor, framing, meta-comment and impersonation of other voices can serve as indicators for double-voicing, this strategy is highly context-bound and its recognition thus very much dependent on ethnographic knowledge.

Baxter (2014: 4) has mapped five rhetorical functions for the application of double voicing: anticipatory, corrective, mitigating, authoritative, and dialogic, among which especially the mitigating and the authoritative function are crucial to our discussion.

Although the two last mentioned functions seem to diametrically oppose each other, as mitigating double-voicing strives to reduce distance and authority and to build solidarity, while authoritative double-voicing seeks to heighten impact and to display personal power (Baxter 2014: 6), we will study a case of facebook exchange where the two last mentioned functions are at work at the same time.

In our concrete case, these two strategies are furthermore woven into an ethnographic setting, where the interlocutors subscribe to a “New Age” ideology with its demand of abandoning the “ego” and its goals and motives, hence - in principal - not allowing for an authoritative voice. Mitigating double-voicing recruits classical face work strategies (Brown/Levinson 1978), like the appreciation of the interlocutor’s person and merits (“I would like to be in a position like yours”), and hereby taps into a canonical “New Age” interpersonal harmony seeking discourse (further supported by the use of emojis: “hearts” and “folded hands”). On the other hand, authoritative double-voicing, in this particular ethnographic setting, has to delegate the question of authority and entitlement away from the sender (and their mundane “ego”) to sources approved of by New Age discourse. By claiming to have
access to such sources ("the deepest part of me"); "my soul"; "from above"; all implying a connection to a non-mundane realm of consciousness) the exchange partners manage what Raymond/Heritage (2006) call 'epistemic authority’ (or right to describe or evaluate states of affairs) and thereby social identity/status.

This results in a complex rhetorical pattern of what could be called triple-voicing, or the simultaneous exchange of information, mitigation of a conflict and authoritative display of power, which it is applied by both exchange partners.

References:

