
On Speech and Silence in Dostoyevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor* and Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

Tania W. Ndirangu

Emory University

Introduction

Russian critic and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, emphasizes the primary importance of an interaction among a plurality of “independent and unmerged voices” in the novels of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. He claims that these multivocal or “polyphonic” speech-interactions serve as the dominant location of meaning.¹ Bakhtin actively polemicizes with Leo Tolstoy, whose novels he calls “monolithically monological” and whose characters he declares “unfree.”² This essay will trouble Bakhtin’s privileging of speech and dialogic interaction through a study of the interplay of speech and silence in Dostoyevsky’s *The Grand Inquisitor* and Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Ultimately, I demonstrate that silence pervades the works of both writers as a device of communication, revelation, and meaning, with the same consequential and substantive signifying function as speech.

Modes of Speech

Bakhtin identifies in Tolstoy’s work a kind of “surplus” in the author’s field of vision, a trove of information and meaning which no character can see, and through which the author has a finalizing or “monologic” command over

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6.

² *Ibid.*, 56.

meaning.³ He contrasts this to Dostoyevsky in whose work nothing is retained for the author's exclusive view, "not a single essential definition, not a single trait, not the smallest feature of the hero."⁴ Dostoyevsky, Bakhtin asserts, "casts it all into the crucible of the hero's own self-consciousness."⁵ The character is no longer an object participating in reality; rather, reality itself unfolds as an object in the character's self-conscious.⁶ The making of such a hero is the result of what Bakhtin calls a "small scale Copernican revolution", an inversion of typical author-character relations in which "the author and the narrator, with all their accumulated points of view and with the descriptions, characterizations, and definitions" are transferred into the hero's view, so that the hero, as it were, illuminates *themselves*.⁷

Accordingly, we find in Dostoyevsky's novels an "unfinalizable" hero—fluid, independent, consisting of "pure voice".⁸ It is the discursive interactions of such independent and unfinalized voices (of Ivan Karamazov, Dmitri Karamazov, Father Zossima, and so forth) which constitutes the Bakhtinian "polyphonic" novel—a novel of pure discourse. Everything outside this discourse — everything that is "merely material", "merely an object", "external and neutral" — is designated by Bakhtin as "nonessential", or "raw material" whose function is only to feed or "provoke" discourse.⁹ Bakhtin determines that ultimately, every external stimulus is "dissolved" into the characters' self-consciousness, pushing them to their outer limits, so that they might utter an "ultimate word", or "truth" with respect to their own self-consciousness. It is only through such a "confessional self-utterance" that truth with respect to any character can be given.¹⁰

Yet, even if we concede that the Dostoyevskian novel consists primarily in discourse, does it necessarily follow that speech, or the discursive interactions of speech, is the locus of final meaning? Indeed, can we even say that this speech always has a persistent or meaningful content? For instance, in the chapter

³ Ibid., 70.

⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁹ Ibid., 53

¹⁰ Ibid., 53

Rebellion Ivan Karamazov narrates a long and effusive speech on his “rebellion” against God— why despite accepting God, he must nonetheless “reject God’s world.”¹¹ Ivan’s speech twists around “essential questions”, from the possibility of loving one’s neighbor to the unatoned tear of a child. Yet in the middle of this, Ivan is interrupted by his younger brother Alyosha who says to him: “You speak with a strange air [...] as though you were not quite yourself.”¹² Indeed, Ivan Karamazov’s speech is a spiral of abstract ideas which, in their consuming self-referentiality, rob Ivan of his proper “selfhood,” so that he is “not quite himself.” Language, here, *abstracts* its speaker, diffuses him, sacrificing person for personality, and personality for idea. As Ivan’s speech grows increasingly elaborate, no longer does it feel like an address from an “I” to a “thou,” nor does his speech encounter the original ethical question. Instead, the speech repeatedly encounters and obfuscates *itself*. Thus, we end up with speech that cannot move past itself; hence, speech does not really make the motion of interpersonal communication. In this way, excessive speech undermines its own communicative or meaningful function.

It might be useful here to distinguish between language which intends to communicate and language whose primary function is creative. This formulation is made by scholar Mikhail Epstein as the “informative” versus the “formative” functions of the Russian word.¹³ Formative language does not simply name or describe phenomena, but “call[s] forth those phenomena themselves.”¹⁴ Russian language itself has this “formative” tendency— it has the quality of a palpable *reality* rather than of a communicative or nominative device, a phenomenon Epstein refers to as the “beingfulness” of the Russian word.¹⁵ We can understand the function of speech in Dostoyevsky’s works as having a strong formative quality: the speeches of Ivan Karamazov, for instance, constitute precisely the *formation* of his person even as they communicate or describe his thought. The novel thus mimics the tendency of the Russian language to locate being in speech.

¹¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor” in *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Susan McReynolds (Norton, W. W. & Company, Inc. 2011), 216.

¹² *Ibid.*, 219.

¹³ Mikhail Epstein, *The Irony of the Ideal: Paradoxes of Russian Literature*, trans. Avram S. Brown (Academic Studies Press, 2015), 281

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 277.

Yet, we see in Ivan Karamazov's speech and in Alyosha's remark, a trade-off between Ivan's substantial self and his effusions of speech. The more speech functions as a location of being, the less Ivan *himself* is the location of his own being—he becomes “not himself.”¹⁶ The “beingfulness” of language which gives Ivan a great power of self-formation can enter a degree of destructive excess. This excess of “beingfulness” is referred to by Epstein as “semantic vampirism”: words begin to “eat away” at, or “drain” their object of life.¹⁷ Thus, the same gesture with which Ivan constructs himself is also revealed as what makes his reality an unreality or “figment.”¹⁸

Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* contains a similar attitude of suspicion towards speech, though not for its excessive “beingfulness”, but for precisely the opposite quality of emptiness. Indeed, much of the speech that populates the life of Ivan Ilyich has no positive content. It is the chatter or “inessential” speech which is part of the performance of high society. Take the following excerpt from the conversation shared between Pyotor Ivanovich, Ivan Ilyich's college friend, and Praskovya Fyodorovna, his widow, after Ivan's funeral:

Praskovya [...] said: "I know you were a true friend of Ivan Ilyich ... " and looked at [Pyotor], expecting some action from him that would correspond to those words. Pyotr Ivanovich knew that [...] here he had to press her hand, ·sigh, and say: "Believe me!" And so he did. And, having done that, he felt that the result achieved was the desired one: that he was moved and she was moved.¹⁹

Pyotor's exclamation “Believe me!” is not an indication of his feelings, it contains no substantive meaning except that it follows the protocol of decency. His speech is more performance than communication, determined by what one knows they “have to” say to maintain the play of decency, to achieve some “desired” result. The story is laced with criticism of language as a false substitute

¹⁶ Dostoyevsky, “Grand Inquisitor,” 219.

¹⁷ Epstein, *Irony of the Ideal*, 281.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁹ Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsk (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 43.

for truth, as simply another facet in the network of falsities society constructs so that it might evade reality. Thus, within the narrative, language has a certain rhetorical, or deceptive function which undermines any attempt at real communication.

However, in the same moment that Tolstoy *rejects* language as a conduit for meaning within the particular events of the narrative, he uses what Gary Saul Morson, in his essay “Tolstoy’s Absolute Language,” calls “absolute language” on the omniscient plane of the narrator. For instance, Tolstoy writes of Ivan Ilyich: “Ivan Ilyich’s life was most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible.”²⁰ Morson understands such an “absolute” statement as Tolstoy’s expressions of “Eternal Truth”, governed by conventions outside the universe of the novel.²¹ In the manner of a proverb, such truths command a timeless authority, and in Morson’s view claim a “*literal* and not literary” truth.²²

It is such absolute language which Bakhtin decries as “monolithically monologic.”²³ Unlike in Dostoyevsky, where the formative language is taken up by the character, in Tolstoy it is taken up by the narrator in the form of such proverbs, and “confines hero’s discourse [...] in the fixed framework of the author’s discourse about him.”²⁴ Indeed, this statement demands neither to be read as hyperbole or irony, but simply to be accepted as a literal truth. In the words of Morson, it is as though Tolstoy is demanding not that the reader suspend disbelief, but in those moments, to “suspend her suspension of disbelief.”²⁵ Tolstoy proceeds through the novel interrupting the world of conventional truths with such piercing and surprising absolutes. Bakhtin criticizes such an authorial position as “naïve,” for it reserves for itself and only itself “the direct and unmediated power to mean.”²⁶

However, what Bakhtin fails to see is Tolstoy’s entirely more subversive criticism of language *itself* as an obstruction of truth. For instance, we may understand, as Ivan Ilyich understands, the syllogism “Caius is a man, men are

²⁰ Ibid., 47.

²¹ Gary Saul Morson, “Tolstoy’s Absolute Language” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1981), 675.

²² Ibid., 675

²³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, 56.

²⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, 56.

²⁵ Morson, “Tolstoy’s Absolute Language,” 675.

²⁶ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, 57.

mortal, therefore Caius is mortal,” yet fail to understand, as Ivan fails to understand, the fact of death.²⁷ The syllogism “had seemed to [Ivan] all his life to be correct only in relation to Caius but by no means to himself.”²⁸ Its abstract logical structure means to us, as it does to Ivan, that “death happens to man in the abstract, not to me.”²⁹ This means that we can accept the syllogism, as Ivan did, without grasping any essential truth. Indeed, the deeper irony of this moment is precisely that Ivan Ilyich *is* Caius, for he *is* man in abstract. As Tolstoy has written him, he has no personal qualities nor unique desires, no particular interests and objects of hate. Instead, he relinquishes personality to live according to the broad law of acceptability. Thus, Tolstoy self-consciously constructs an objectified or reified figure who corresponds precisely to Caius of the logical syllogism, and thereby reveals the inadequacy of abstracted language at corresponding to a living person. Where Bakhtin’s interpretation of Dostoyevsky’s Ivan Karamazov an “abstracted man”—diffuse, distant, hovering above life but not living, Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich is “man in abstract”—reified, objectified, overdetermined. Thus, both writers reveal the negative capability of language to disfigure a human being into something which is abstract, not quite real.

Variations of Silence

The Grand Inquisitor, the titular figure of Ivan Karamazov’s poem, delivers a wrathful and demonic speech to Christ, his sole audience, described by scholar Kate Holland as “an inversion of the Christian moral paradigm.”³⁰ Yet, Christ provides no spoken response, but approaches the inquisitor “in silence” and softly “kiss[es] him on his bloodless, aged lips.”³¹ Likewise, when Ivan Karamazov has finished reciting the poem, Alyosha Karamazov rises, goes to Ivan, and “softly kisse[s] him on his lips.”³² The gesture of the silent kiss contains the powerful positive significance of the infinite mercy of God, disclosed eloquently through *silence* once language has reached its limits.

²⁷ Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 70.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁰ Kate Holland, “Novelizing Religious Experience: The Generic Landscape of ‘The Brothers Karamazov’” *Slavic Review*, vol. 66, no. 1 (2007), 71.

³¹ Dostoyevsky, “Grand Inquisitor,” 244.

³² *Ibid.*, 244.

Not only does the silence take on this positive meaning, but it transforms (or rather reveals) something about the speech that came before it. Namely, that the Grand Inquisitor's speech, with all its terrible images, in all its winding logic and accusation, is fundamentally impotent, mere noise in the face of Truth. That is, the speech enters such excesses of abstraction and self-referentiality that it loses the ability to *mean* or to signify, which Bakhtin so praises. In overlooking the kiss, one cannot understand the full meaning of the speech. Borrowing from Epstein's description, the speech's words are "unable to creatively transform reality" yet "they have at the same time forgotten how to reflect it; they are formatively impotent and informationally void."³³ In some way, then, these words constitute a kind of paradoxical silence, making Dostoyevsky not only a negotiator of speech and dialogue, as Bakhtin imagines, but of silences.

It is crucial, then, to understand the variations of silence, where silence is located, and how silence, as opposed to speech, can have a dominant meaningful function. In the view of Mikhail Epstein, silence is contingent on, or "made possible" by speech, for it is only through speech that silence gains its "theme."³⁴ That is, we cannot properly say one is "silent" about something if there was never, however abstractly, the possibility of speech concerning that thing. We can understand this as a reworking of Wittgenstein's maxim "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" into "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one cannot be silent," for it is speech, or the possibility of speech, which designates and delimits what one can be silent about.³⁵ Silence, then, is the "extraverbal pronouncement" of a theme which is pre-designated. In this understanding, silence emerges from the same "intentional-notional" field as speech, they are in the same "virtual realm."³⁶

Such an understanding of silence is dramatized in both in *The Grand Inquisitor* and *The Brothers Karamazov* as a whole, in the form of a secret. We can understand a secret literally as a silence which gains its theme and its significance from the possibility of speech. In *The Grand Inquisitor*, it is precisely such a silence which the Inquisitor keeps from the masses which charges him with existential and demonic significance. He keeps the knowledge

³³ Epstein, *Irony of the Ideal*, 281.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 271.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 271, 247.

of human freedom a *secret*, taking it upon himself like a burden, so that mankind may be happy. Thus, The Grand Inquisitor even within his perverse logic, is *elevated* by silence for his position is contingent on an element of secrecy. Likewise, it is the secret of who killed Fyodor Karamazov which is the entire propelling force of Dostoyevsky's novel. Thus, silence, on a basic level, permeates the text, enabling plot movement and structuring the relations of its characters to one another.

In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, we see Ivan begins to despair, and as he understands the falsity of his life more lucidly, he enters into deeper and deeper states of inexpressibility. Although Tolstoy provides the reader with the minute details of Ivan's thought, Ivan himself is unable to express them verbally to his wife, children, or to any guest. Consider the following conversation he has with his wife after he takes communion:

"Isn't it true you're feeling better?"

He said "Yes" without looking at her.

Her clothes, her figure, the expression of her face, the sound of her voice— all told him one thing: "Not right. All that you've lived and live by is a lie, a deception, concealing life and death from you." [...] Something new set in: twisting, and shooting, and choking his breath.

The expression of his face when he said "Yes" was terrible. Having uttered this "Yes," he looked her straight in the face, turned over with a quickness unusual in his weak state, and shouted:

"Go away, go away, leave me alone!"³⁷

In this conversation we see that the *angst* and the deep dread Ivan feels at the prospect of his death is incommensurable with speech. There is a dissonance between every word he utters, and his true inner state, which Tolstoy describes as something "twisting, and shooting, and choking his breath."³⁸ Thus,

³⁷ Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 89.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 89.

underlying Ivan's speech is this silent stifling feeling which is not only inexpressible, but which manifests as *inexpressibility*. Yet precisely this sensation of inexpressibility is crucial to the story, for the dissonance it creates introduces a sense of derealization or defamiliarization to elements of Ivan's world that previously appeared ordinary—such as his wife's clothes and figure. It is as though this mental state allows the objects of the world to fall away or recede (just as with Heideggerian *Angst*) thereby revealing some deeper truth on the ontological conditions of human consciousness.

As the narrative proceeds to a close, Ivan Ilyich realizes that even the feelings of hate and anger he harbors towards his wife and daughter are a kind of falseness and must also fall away so that he can die in peace. He tries to express this to his son and wife, yet only these words come out:

"Take him away ... sorry ... for you, too ... " He also wanted to say "Forgive," but said "Forgo," and, no longer able to correct himself, waved his hand, knowing that the one who had to would understand.³⁹

Again, we see clearly Tolstoy's view of a kind of truth which cannot find expression in words, but which exists as a deeper "understanding" between people. Words are compromised, mistaken, stumbling over themselves, and in the case of "take him away ... sorry ... for you, too ..." can literally fail to make sense. However, there can exist a surplus of subtle meaning where language ceases and communication through honest signals such as physical gestures, intuitions, and expressions begin, whereby "the one who [has] to would understand."⁴⁰

An important distinction can be made, however, between the silence which emerges from a decision to forego speech, and the silence which emerges when one is *denied* speech. This latter category is referred to by Epstein as a "preverbal" silence—the silence of a slave.⁴¹ Scholar Caryl Emerson, in her chapter *Polyphony and The Carnavalesque*, points out the "gallery of tortured and silenced children that are so crucial a part of Dostoyevsky's symbolic

³⁹ Ibid. 89.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 89.

⁴¹ Epstein, *Irony of the Ideal*, 308.

universe.”⁴² They feature, for instance, as one of the main subjects of Ivan’s lengthy speech in *Rebellion*, where he describes these unspeaking figures of children getting beaten, thrashed, starved, and torn apart by dogs.⁴³ The silence of these children is the oppressed, self-diminished silence of subjects who have never been allowed to speak; it is a silence which does not signal power but absence. Though these evocations are somewhat garish and alarming, the presence of images of slavish, silenced, suffering contrasts greatly with Bakhtin’s view of Dostoyevskian torture, which is always the torture of words. These visual images suggest Dostoyevsky’s attunement to the signifying power of silence, and the importance of a Levinisian recognition of the suffering Other, rather than the solipsistic hero imagined by Bakhtin.

Perhaps we can also perceive a similar “preverbal” silence pervading the entire first half of *The Death Of Ivan Ilyich*. I say this because this first section, where Tolstoy describes Ivan Ilyich’s funeral and then recounts his life, is populated by lifeless, banal characters who, like Gogol’s “Dead Souls”, lack any semblance of spiritual life or agency. We may recall, for instance, Pyotr Ivanovich crossing himself at the funeral “for decency’s sake”, or Ivan repeatedly adjusting his attitude in marital life in order to “to lead a decent life approved of by society.”⁴⁴ Through and through, Ivan, his friends, his colleagues, his wife, all behave like slaves under the order of decency and propriety. Accordingly, their speech is also a kind of “non-speech” —it is hollow and contentless. We see this for instance, in Tolstoy’s description of Ivan Ilyich speaking to his wife:

“Ivan Ilyich told her how he had been feted in Petersburg, how all those who had been his enemies were put to shame and now fawned on him, how they envied his post, [...] Praskovya Fyodorovna listened to all this and pretended to believe it and [...] made plans for a new arrangement of life in the town they were moving to. And Ivan Ilyich was glad to see that those plans were his plans, that [his] life was again

⁴² Caryl Emerson, “Polyphony and the Carnavalesque: Introducing the Terms” (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 9.

⁴³ Dostoyevsky, “Grand Inquisitor” 233.

⁴⁴ Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 40, 53.

acquiring its true, natural character of cheerful pleasantness and decency.⁴⁵

Such hollow words, spoken from one lifeless figure to another, do not constitute communication through speech but rather, the *performance* of speech. As such, the entire section is characterized by a pervasive silence, and these characters are like mute slaves to propriety. They do not have the internal development or authenticity to engage in essential speech and only when Ivan Ilyich is dying does he realize this fact.

Thus, in *The Grand Inquisitor* we glimpse the preverbal silence of the suffering child, the verbal argument of Ivan Karamazov, and the transverbal silence of Christ's kiss. Dostoyevsky's writing cannot, then, be read as simply interacting speech, for the full range of signification is contingent on the various modes and meanings of silence as well. In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, we see firstly a preverbal silence, the silence of speakers enslaved to propriety. Yet, it can also be argued that Ivan Ilyich demonstrates some version of transverbal silence in the moments nearing his death, where he places his palm on his son's head, and later he gives up his clumsy attempts at speech, realizing that "the one who [has] to would understand" signaling that for Tolstoy, the epitome of communication is located in a transcendence of words.⁴⁶

Conclusion

In conclusion, meaning-creation occurs in the text through substantive interactions of both speech and silence, and not just speech and speech, as is suggested in the Bakhtinian model. As the contents of both *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *The Grand Inquisitor* demonstrate, speech cannot always exhaust essential meaning, and indeed it can often be *void* of meaning when the silences that punctuate and inform it are not considered. A careful reading of both Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy reveals their care to balance the tensions between silence and speech, at one moment using to one complement and illuminate the other, and at another moment, to expose its falsity. It is apparent, then, that one cannot properly understand the significance of speech or silence in either text

⁴⁵ Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 56.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

without paying attention to both— they must always be taken as entangled and interdependent devices of meaning.

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