

## 4 Contemporary Views on Style

Previous chapters have shown tensions regarding the role of style in rhetoric and education from the ancient and classical eras in Greece and Rome, as well as non-western cultures, through to the early twentieth century in Europe and the US. This chapter and the next two chapters focus on the relevance of style to specializations within our discipline, including basic writing, language difference, and digital rhetorics. Even if rhetoric and composition scholars do not directly use the term “style,” they discuss stylistic issues. Understanding style as ubiquitous in rhetoric and composition helps teachers and students become aware of the relationship between decisions at the level of the sentences or passage and their contributions to a writer’s overall style or voice.

Advocates of style in rhetoric and composition today include Paul Butler, Tom Pace, T. R. Johnson, Susan Peck MacDonald, Tara Lockhart, Jeanne Fahnestock, Chris Holcomb, and Jimmie Killingsworth. These theorists discuss style explicitly, and they take an interdisciplinary approach that often combines classical rhetoric, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and stylistics. For instance, Holcomb’s *Rhetoric Review* essay “Performative Stylistics and the Question of Academic Prose,” draws on classical rhetoric, stylistics, and sociolinguistics to analyze debates between Judith Butler, Terry Eagleton, and Gayatri Spivak on the responsibilities of academics to write in a clear style for large, public readerships. Fahnestock explores style in these same areas as well as genre theory, writing in the sciences, and multimodality. These authors—Butler, Fahnestock, Holcomb, Johnson, Pace, Killingsworth—form a visible and largely coherent movement calling for a return to style in our field.

Paul Butler makes the case for renewed attention to style, while using it to synthesize theories of language in sociolinguistics, dialectology, hybrid academic writing, language difference, and rhetorical grammar. As Butler states, an underlying principle in all of these areas

is a view that “form (style) and content (meaning) are inextricably linked” because meaning “is connotative . . . and comes from various rhetorical elements—humor, irony or sarcasm, emphasis, and even ethos . . . conveyed through form” (“Public Intellectual” 78). As Butler argues in his 2008 book *Out of Style*, we can make more precise arguments about language if we move style to the forefront of our research and teaching.

Too often, Butler maintains, style is associated with grammatical correctness, and is thus dismissed as another way to constrain student agency rather than nurture it through a comprehensive set of strategies and tools. By neglecting style, scholars and teachers cede the topic to public discourse—where traditional grammarians and prescriptivists dominate, and journalists and popular intellectuals routinely accuse college writing teachers of lowering standards. The next section, on style in publics and counterpublics, attends directly to such discussions. Ironically, Quintilian made a similar statement about rhetoricians, relinquishing the *progymnasmata* to grammar-school teachers, a decision through which rhetoric “has all but been driven out of its rightful possessions” (2.1.6). It would appear that history has a way of repeating itself, even with regard to writing and rhetoric.

## STYLE IN PUBLICS AND COUNTERPUBLICS

Public derisions of composition for failing to teach students how to write clearly and correctly are not hard to find. For example, Stanley Fish has notoriously argued in a *New York Times* op-ed, titled “Devoid of Content,” that college writing classes should only teach grammar and style, and by style he means clear sentences that reproduce the norms of academic discourse.<sup>24</sup> Similar pieces have been written by Heather MacDonald, Louise Menand, and George Will.<sup>25</sup> We see similar discourses in popular books, such as Lynn Truss’s *Eats, Shoots, and*

24. Fish has elaborated the stance in his 2005 op-ed piece “Devoid of Content” into an entire book, titled *How to Write a Sentence*, a blend of his own approach to literary stylistics with a tutorial in Chomsky’s Transformational Generative Grammar—the basis by which we understand language through phrases and clauses that can be combined in nearly infinite ways.

25. Another compelling example of such public discourse on style is a 2011 online opinion column in *Forbes*, in which Brown University graduate Michael Ellsberg accuses higher education of encouraging college students to

*Leaves* or Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. It helps to see various methods of studying and teaching style in rhetoric and composition as forming "counterpublics" against these prevailing discourses, and these have implications for other areas of writing instruction—such as linguistic diversity and language rights. As Kathryn T. Flannery states in her 1995 book, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, "style is never innocent" (28). Style often serves as a site of socio-political struggle, where different values are contested across public and academic boundaries.

Scholars in rhetoric and composition have responded to public criticism by interrogating common assumptions about style. In a 2009 issue of *College English*, Catherine Prendergast historicizes public discourse on style, showing how "clarity, brevity, and correctness have defined the conventional wisdom of what counts as good style for the last fifty years" since the first edition of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, along with "many . . . progeny, including the far more interesting Lynn Truss's *Eats, Shoots, & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*" (13). In his recent book, *After the Public Turn*, Frank Farmer describes such discourse as "limit[ing] writing pedagogy strictly to considerations of form, that tend to conflate written style with prescriptive grammars, and that tends to dismiss as irrelevant any genuine motivation our students might have to write well" (134).

Paul Butler has also addressed this issue in his 2008 article, "Style and the Public Intellectual," proposing that rhetoric and composition should reclaim public discussions on writing, and to "go public with a renewed emphasis on style and to employ its disciplinary expertise" on the subject (62). As Butler observes in *Out of Style*, "The public conceptions controlling debates on style today—which often reduce style to the equivalent of grammar or prescriptive rules—have effectively usurped the topic from the discipline [of composition] itself" (19). Butler's fifth chapter provides a handful of evocative examples of this usurpation. In one, Heather Mac Donald's 1995 *Public Interest* article, "Why Johnny Can't Write," indicts rhetoric and composition for excusing teachers from the need to teach correctness. Mac Donald, a lawyer by profession, goes on to declare that "Every writing theory of the past thirty years has come up with reasons why it's not necessary to teach grammar and style . . . because grammatical errors

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write like Talcott Parsons, an anthropologist whose prose Richard Lanham mocks in *Style: an Anti-Textbook*.

signify the author is politically engaged” (11). At best, we might say that MacDonald has an incomplete understanding of why research in composition turned away from an explicit focus on grammar. As Butler contends throughout his book, these views conflate style with correctness, missing the historical fact that correctness has always been only one component of the canon, not its essence.

Both Farmer and Butler embrace the idea of composition as a counterpublic, albeit with slight differences. Butler encourages rhetoric and composition scholars to take on the role of public intellectual, to bring the substantial body of knowledge about style of the field into public discussions, and position it actively against public intellectuals like Fish. Farmer admits that such a change would be an improvement over the current status of our discipline, but he offers a more complicated view of counterpublics based on the idea of bricoleurs, who “reject the honorific of *public intellectual* but would not reject any situational exigency to perform that function as needed” (149). Farmer reasons that if we write back to public deriders of our discipline, we can “use our expertise situationally, creatively, tactically,” rather than being forced into a somewhat limited role as a talking head, simply summoned by editors of newspapers and magazines, and then rolled back into storage (149).

One of the most prevalent assumptions about style in public discourse is that academics write in a deliberately opaque style, and that this style discredits their opinions. For example, Terry Eagleton has criticized the prose of Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak as “pretentiously opaque” (qtd. in Holcomb 204) in the *London Review of Books*. In response, Butler asserts the need for a voice that makes “readers pause and reflect on the power of language to shape the world” (“Bad Writer”). As Butler argues, if there is an affinity between radicalism and dense writing, it is their ability to frustrate norms. It is partly through difficult writing that radical intellectuals force readers to stop and pay attention to relationships between language and realities.<sup>26</sup> From this stance, a clear, plain style is not always the most appropriate

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26. Chris Holcomb disagrees with Judith Butler in his 2005 *Rhetoric Review* essay, “Performative Stylistics and the Question of Academic Prose,” stating that more often than not, radical prose serves an exclusionary, self-serving purpose rather than a democratic one.

end goal—a radical prose style challenges the Aristotelian ideals still pervasive in American attitudes about discourse and writing.

Michael Warner sees public critiques such as Eagleton's as "primitive" because they assume that "a clear style results in a popular audience and that political engagement requires having the most extensive audience possible" (137). Warner goes on to explain this misperception as a reason why "Anyone who dissents from it can only be heard as proposing inanities: that bad writing is necessary; that incomprehensibility should be cultivated; that speech in order to be politically radical must have no audience" (139). Writing in a difficult style may reduce the size of one's audience, but that does not make such writing bad, arrogant, or pretentious. We might deduce from Warner that it is important to teach students to appreciate difficult styles and to see that a plain or difficult style is each appropriate for different purposes. Doing so might invoke a future public more tolerant of linguistic and stylistic diversity. Min-Zhan Lu makes a similar point in her essays, including "Essay on the Work of Composition," in which she calls on teachers to help bring forth a more tolerant and receptive culture toward difference and deviation that extends beyond the academy.

This discussion of publics and counterpublics provides a foundation for the appreciation of academic orientations to style that privilege difference, deviation, and the negotiation of norms in student writing. When teachers merely teach style the way Strunk and White prescribe, or when they only correct students' mistakes in using style guides provided by MLA or textbook publishers, they are succumbing to a larger public narrative that circumscribes style as norming, confining, and regulatory. Incorporating other approaches does not exclude these norms, but it does not mandate their absolute authority. Even Quintilian advised students to break with traditions and rules, to take risks when they felt that a rhetorical situation called for doing so. The rest of this chapter teases out what this attitude entails in terms of teaching voice and grammar in college composition courses.

The next section defines voice, and situates scholarship on voice as a vital complement to pedagogies of style. Often, we use the terms "style" and "voice" interchangeably, without realizing their relationship. While the term "voice" may refer to many of the same traits as "style," the term brings our attention to the writer's presence. As Elbow argues, the term "style" can lead teachers and students down a path toward abstract analysis, while missing how a real person—or

at least our perception of one—emerges from such analysis. Thinking about style in terms of voice helps make the purpose of deviation and resistance to publics more tangible. After all, it is the people and their voices—not merely texts and rhetorical effects—that struggle for recognition and freedom of expression.

Teachers may also conflate style, grammar, and correctness—just as many public intellectuals do. There are two consequences to this. On the one hand, teachers may perpetuate the dominant public and reproduce it in their classrooms, or they might resist teaching style and grammar altogether, seeing both as too authoritarian. During the 1980s in particular, composition scholarship seemed to mistakenly equate style with grammar, purging them both in favor of social-epistemic approaches (see Connors’s “Erasure of the Sentence” and MacDonald’s “Erasure of Language.”) A complete and nuanced view of style must recognize its connection to grammar as a descriptive terminology, not grammar as a set of arbitrary rules. Chapter 1 mentioned Patrick Hartwell’s category of “stylistic grammars” that includes work by Martha Kolln, Francis Christensen, and Joseph Williams. This chapter and the next contain sections that promote grammar as a source of stylistic creativity—affirming its connections with style and voice. In some ways, their work can help dissolve some of the troubled boundaries between public and counterpublic discourses on style. They show us that grammar is important, but also malleable—and especially important for students to learn as they craft their own voices.

### STYLE, VOICE, AND DISCOURSE

The first chapter of this book includes a section defining style partly as a matter of voice, drawing on the work of process theorists such as Peter Elbow. The process movement emerged during the 1970s as part of a larger turn away from matters of form that had dominated college writing instruction since the New Curriculum. Many process theorists, such as Linda Flower and John Hayes, Janet Emig, and Mike Rose, concentrated on cognitive dimensions of the writing process, and developed scientific models to explain the writing process as a series of recursive stages that involved goal-setting and problem-solving (see Flower and Hayes’s “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing” as a prime example). As such, they devoted some passing attention to voice, tone, and grammar. Peter Elbow, often referred to as an expressivist

for his focus on writing as self-expression, has always concentrated on voice (and style). As Elbow notes in his 2007 *College English* essay, “Voice in Writing Again,” the two terms often mean the same thing, though he prefers the term “voice” over “style” because it circumvents the need to discuss grammar—a discussion he finds potentially confining, intimidating, and dehumanizing. In other words, describing prose with more evocative yet impressionistic terms such as “bossy” or “condescending” can help writers understand the rhetorical effects of their language choices more vividly than advising them about the overuse of subordinating clauses.

As Elbow states in *Writing with Power*, there is not only voice, but *real* voice. A writer’s voice may be appropriate, fluid, and confident, but a writer’s real voice is more than that; it is evocative. Writers can adopt many voices for different occasions, but only their *real* voice lends power to their prose. Admittedly, Elbow struggles to define the real voice he wants to help students achieve. As he tries to convey, real voice

has the power to make you pay attention and understand—the words go deep. I don’t know the objective characteristics that distinguish writing with real voice from writing with mere voice. For me it is a matter of hearing resonance rather than being able to point to things on the page. (299)

Elbow has an easier time defining what real voice is *not*, and describing how most conventional pedagogies that dwell on rules and conventions for college writing constrict voice rather than promote *real* voice. A term that Elbow and others use to describe voiceless writing is “Engfish,” a term originally coined by Ken Macrorie in the book *Telling Writing*. Like Elbow, Macrorie was an early advocate of freewriting, a pedagogy prompting students to express their thoughts and feelings on any issue without pausing to organize or revise their writing for correctness. Process theorists like Elbow and Macrorie often attest to the power and clarity of unplanned freewriting when compared to the heavily revised, hyper-edited prose students produce when trying to complete assignments. Thinking of voice in terms of style, then, the idea is that students use freewriting to generate writing that is clearer, more honest, and more direct.

Many later social-epistemic schools of rhetoric and writing instruction characterized this approach as privileging some kind of inner

truth or version of reality over social interaction. David Bartholomae, Joseph Harris, and James Berlin are especially pointed critics of Elbow's methods. These scholars stress the importance of discourse communities in the formation of a writer's voice, and see Elbow as over-privileging the individual writer and failing to fully account for how writers negotiate their need for self-expression with the expectations of academic writing. For instance, Harris points out the flaw in trying to find an allegedly authentic voice, comparing it to "saying blue jeans are more genuine than business suits" (33). Harris resists judgment claims about students' writing, such as "nam[ing] various passages as real or powerful without having to say why" (32). A section in chapter 6 explores similar complications of voice in scholarship on second-language writing. Elbow seems open to such criticism, and gestures toward qualities of voice that he cannot fully define or illustrate. In *Writing with Power*, he concedes that "Sometimes I fear I will never be clear about what I mean by voice. Certainly I have waxed incoherent on many occasions" (286).

Elbow has preferred this level of uncertainty rather than resorting to the language of grammar, at least until his recent book, *Vernacular Eloquence*. Here, Elbow seems to finally articulate a precise and thorough theory of what he means by voice in writing. He draws on research in linguistics regarding differences in spoken and written discourse—in particular, M. A. K. Halliday's 1987 book chapter, "Spoken and Written Modes of Meaning." Halliday describes spoken and written discourse as planned and unplanned. Both writing and speaking can, at times, seem planned or unplanned, and so they elude simple categorization. Elbow uses this framework to clarify his long-evolving definition of voice. When someone writes with voice, they draw on the everyday, unplanned patterns of conversation (even idioms) to disrupt the planned, hierarchical patterns of writing that can lead to unclear, wordy, impersonal, or disinterested prose. Thus, seeing style as voice highlights a broader goal of style, and gestures toward the ways style is not simply the use of grammar, or even stylistic devices or imagery or sound. Style is all of these, of course, but it is all aimed at creating a voice that is inviting to readers.

An interesting voice can take a variety of forms, a fact that Elbow has used to link his work with research in other areas of rhetoric and composition—namely, language difference. In *Vernacular Eloquence*, but also in an earlier contribution to the collection *Alt Dis*, Elbow



addresses the use of vernacular languages such as Black English as a way of introducing more spontaneity, originality, and self into the early drafts of student papers, helping students negotiate their non-standard language varieties with the conventions of academic writing. In *Vernacular Eloquence*, he quotes from a freewrite by colleague Janet Bean, with whom he co-authored another essay on voice and language difference in *Composition Studies*, titled “Should We Invite Students to Write in Home Languages? Complicating the Yes/No Debate.”<sup>27</sup> Bean writes that “we have to talk about the politics of standardization, about dialect and value, about the relativity of correctness . . . we have to stop believing in a pure standard English” (qtd. in Elbow 156). Endorsing this view, Elbow’s latest work on voice suggests to researchers and teachers that we are never just teaching style or voice, but styles and voices. The patterns of everyday speech that can enliven writing may derive from many different forms of language, not merely from the ones currently authorized by higher education, dominant publics, and the textbook industry.

Such a view of voice and linguistic diversity becomes key in work on what Philip Marzluf describes as “diversity writing,” the prose produced by marginalized students who perform authenticity through non-standard forms of English. For example, Southern students might deliberately use the word “y’all” in a paper, or students from Singapore might use “la,” to prove certain aspects of their ethnic or geographic identities. In his critique of voice in “Diversity Writing,” Marzluf echoes Elbow’s critics, with a special emphasis on linguistically diverse students. For Marzluf, while Elbow’s pedagogy avoids the trap of equating voice with self, a misappropriation of voice may risk stereotyping and pigeon-holing students. He says, “To contend that students are closer to or more comfortable with certain types of language—or that vernaculars reveal students’ selves more honestly—is rarely an innocent claim” (514). Such a view implies that all African-American students write better when they are encouraged to draw on AAVE, or that all white Southerners secretly yearn to write in the voices of their great-grandparents. If students come to see voice as the expression of a true self, rather than as a social construction, they may be pressured into seeing other voices, other styles of writing, as somehow inauthentic, fake, or depersonalizing.

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27. This article also contains contributions by several language specialists, including Paul Kei Matsuda.

This section made three main points about style and voice. First, in many ways, style and voice are synonymous terms. Second, when pressing for a distinction, we see that voice can refer to the sense of presence a writer creates via style, and also specifically to the use of oral patterns to make prose more stylistically inviting. Third, it is helpful to think of “voice” not as uniform, but as varied. Writers may develop many voices, or their “voice” may draw from many different forms of a spoken language. Because writers can construct many voices, teachers should be cautious of endorsing one particular style or voice as superior—whether that means more in line with academic discourse or, conversely, more authentic. The idea of voice as voices will be taken further in the next section, on Bakhtin’s approach to style and voice. Bakhtin’s approach treats stylization as double-voicing, showing that that voice is already innately plural.

### BAKHTIN, DIALOGISM, AND STYLE

If expressivists such as Elbow treat style in terms of voice, then Bakhtin’s theories of heteroglossia, stylization, and dialogism encourage thought about style/voice as the negotiation of multiple voices. In fact, Harris hopes to redefine voice away from the expression of a unitary self, asserting that “we need to begin with the idea that our culture speaks to us through many competing voices” (34) and that writing is a process of responding to and appropriating them.<sup>28</sup> Bakhtin was one of the first theorists to argue for the inherent diversity within language (heteroglossia), explaining that a single speaker’s social interactions within a given day may include a specialized language used at work, a different one at home with family, yet another with friends, and yet another in church. Moreover, these different tongues within a single language are always in dialogue with one another (dialogism). Each type of language evolves in relation to the other, as any speaker carries bits of language from one social sphere to another, always repeating and imitating what he or she has heard someone else say in one situation when it seems appropriate in another. To explain this process, Bakhtin posits the term *double-voicing*. Anytime we speak, we are not

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28. Harris references Bakhtin directly, but consciously situates his discussion within the context of the Amherst School in the 1930s—where similar notions developed specific to college writing instruction.

simply voicing ourselves, but voicing the many others from whom we borrow language.

The idea of dialogized heteroglossia becomes realized in Bakhtin's illustration of the daily life of a Russian peasant, in the essay "Discourse in the Novel." Bakhtin describes the multiple social situations and their respective language genres, describing first how the peasant may see these as isolated from one another. However,

As soon as a critical interanimation of languages began to occur in the consciousness of our peasant, as soon as it became clear that these were not only various different languages but even internally variegated languages . . . then the inviolability and predetermined quality of these languages came to an end, and the necessity of actively choosing one's orientation among them began. (296)

At this point, the peasant begins blending language conventions between "the language and world of prayer, the language and world of song, the language and world of labor and everyday life, and the specific language and world of local authorities," and so on (296). Each of these languages has its own norms in terms of diction and grammar, or sentence length and structure. While they might possess clear differences, they are not rigid; they are always in the process of changing each other. Teachers and students might think today of the ways they employ different choices at the local and global levels of discourse that signify a specific style.

Via Bakhtin, voice becomes *voices* and style becomes *styles*. It may be easy for teachers to simply tell students to write in a voice that "sounds natural" but, ultimately, writers never draw only on their own oral discourse patterns to develop a sense of voice. Rather, they are always appropriating phrases they have heard before and weaving them into their own texts. Far from plagiarism, this is the natural function of language according to Bakhtin—what he refers to as double-voiced discourse, as described in *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Just as language is inherently diverse, it is also inherently populated with a range of intentions or purposes. Someone might make the same utterance in a semantic sense, but might do so in a context that completely changes the actual idea conveyed. (Just imagine someone saying "I love you" in an endearing tone, then hearing it uttered in return with a sarcastic undertone.) When someone appropriates a piece of discourse and de-

plays it in a different context, they are engaging in what Bakhtin calls double-voicing. All language is always double-voiced.

Seeing style and voice as inherently diverse means understanding one's voice as permeated and inflected by everyone they know and everything they have read. Different forms of double-voicing exist, including emulation, imitation, paraphrase, and quotation. In each case, one speaker borrows words from someone else and uses them for a different purpose. Bakhtin specifically refers to a kind of passive double-voicing as "stylization," in which writers adopt the style of someone they have read, either to conform to that style or to revive it for a contemporary time. By "passive," Bakhtin does not mean passive on the part of the writer, but on the part of the source. The writer who imitates or copies the style of another is being extremely active in the process of appropriation and redirection, but the source is passive in that it allows the adaptation to take place. According to Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, in *Creation of a Prosaics*, "The crucial point is that the stylizer constructs his [or her] utterance so that the voice of the other will be heard to sound within his [or her] own" (151).

Bakhtin's idea of style as heteroglossic double-voicing directly contradicts any idea that academic writing can be boiled down to one timeless, universal set of stylistic conventions or standards. Even within a single field, individual journals and editors have different conventions and preferences for how authors use language to construct their scholarly identities. Second, this notion of style presses teachers and scholars to recognize how different disciplines and their stylistic conventions ricochet off one another, as writers and editors carry habits and expectations back and forth between them. Moreover, we recognize that the wide variety of discourses students use will unavoidably seep into their academic writing—to deny that is to deny that language itself is porous.

Bakhtin went so far as to state that diversity described not only language, but also a kind of linguistic identity. Our very selves consist of multiple versions that are always shaping and evolving in relation to others. Chikako Kumamoto builds on this idea in a 2002 *College Composition and Communication* article on Bakhtin's conception of identity and its influence on language choices or, in Bakhtin's terms, "internal dialogization." She describes her own diverse set of selves as an eloquent "I," one that is "Japanese female . . . educated in an American parochial system, converted to Christianity in Japan . . .

completed graduate work in Milwaukee and Chicago, [and] trained in Renaissance studies” (74). Each identity constitutes a self that is connected to the others. If the self is selves, then how could anyone expect that a single, unchanging set of conventions could suffice to make this multiple “I” eloquent in every situation?

#### BAKHTIN, CLASSICAL RHETORIC, AND POSTMODERN IMITATION

Postmodern pedagogies of imitation recognize a connection between Bakhtin’s theories and the Greco-Roman tradition, a tradition that might otherwise be seen as authoritative, monolithic, and monolingual. In Chapter 2, I noted a kind of linguistic xenophobia in the classical tradition; however, contemporary scholarship has managed to separate classical approaches to style from such socio-cultural baggage. Writing in a 1995 issue of *JAC*, Mary Minock describes classroom practices based on her theoretical reading of Quintilian and Bakhtin, in which students re-read difficult texts as many as “seven times as homework over the course of a week and respond each time for at least a full single-spaced page” (503) in order to facilitate what she calls “unconscious imitation” (500). In unconscious, as opposed to intentional imitation, students still demonstrate “traces of syntactic imitation” (505) in their writing as they intuitively appropriate the voices of the authors they work with throughout the semester. Minock’s pedagogy derives from Bakhtin’s definition of “any gifted, creative exposition” as “always a free stylistic variation on another’s discourse” (*Dialogic Imagination* 347).

Minock’s use of Bakhtin highlights how imitation and mimicry occur in ordinary, everyday language use. She acknowledges that classical pedagogies of imitation were not meant to oppress students, but to direct what they already had an inclination to do—mimic one another. In fact, imitation is just as ordinary a linguistic act, according to Bakhtin, as stylistic figures of thought and expression. From a dialogic viewpoint, what rhetoricians developed as a learned activity already occurs spontaneously in language. Minock points out that Quintilian recognized this to some extent, saying that Books I and X of *The Orator’s Education* raise “an extremely relevant point about the spontaneous unconscious imitation that comes from constant exposure” (500). The unconsciousness of mimicry and parody (ironic mimicry) becomes even clearer, as Minock attributes the inspiration for her

pedagogy to discovering “quite accidentally” that “all of my students . . . could spontaneously write spot commercials” despite the fact that “none of my students ever claimed they admired or had studied the spot commercial” (500). She goes on to say that “Their ability to generate the rhetoric and syntax of the genre was based on their unwritten dialogues with particular spot commercials that had been repeated with subtle shifts of context” (500).

The central import of Minock’s pedagogy is that if students can instinctively learn the stylistic and generic features of any text through constant exposure and internalization in ways that Bakhtin theorized as the imitative nature of dialogue and interaction in speech genres, then this commonplace ability to produce through imitation can be harnessed according to more formal teaching methods, like those proposed by Quintilian. Carefully planned exercises in imitation can expedite this otherwise gradual process, through which students develop an original set of voices or styles of writing and speaking. Such methods, as described by scholars during the mid-twentieth century, are thus not confining, but freeing. They take what language does in ordinary circumstances according to Bakhtin—the imitation and appropriation of the words of others—and turns it into an object of study to give students more control over that process.

The co-ownership of utterances that makes languages dialogic—always multi-voiced—also makes all speech acts a form of imitation. Bakhtin defines originality (the product of invention) as always involving the processes of borrowing and imitating other discourses, whether they are works of literature or speech utterances. According to Bakhtin, only “extremely subtle and sometimes imperceptible transitions” exist between the development of what we might call an original style and the imitation of someone else’s style (*Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* 190). Bakhtin theorizes that language users are always directly or indirectly borrowing, adapting, and imitating one another—even in their daily conversational exchanges. This observation shows how what we perceive as an original or unique style is always rooted in prior discourses.

Bakhtin’s concept of multi-voiced discourse holds that style is not developed by servile imitation, but by “listening to the other and trying to produce your own style in proportion to the other” (“On Rhetoric” 125). In this sense, imitation is not “mimetic behavior” in a strict sense, but rather a step in the process of crafting a “signature in relation

to the signature of the other” (125). Drawing on Greco-Roman rhetorics to question the modern premises of authorship, John Muckelbauer lays out the implications of the imitation-novelty dynamic for teaching in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Muckelbauer argues that invention is a “necessary component of the repetitive translation from model to copy” (71), and treats imitation as a tool for the development of originality. This recognition leads Muckelbauer to endorse Edward P. J. Corbett’s pedagogical use of imitation—an adaptation of Quintilian’s advice to students and teachers to develop rhetorical skill by emulating model texts.

In 2005, a special issue of *Written Communication* focused on a recently translated essay by Bakhtin about grammar, style, and pedagogy, titled “Dialogic Origin and Dialogic Pedagogy of Grammar: Stylistics in Teaching Russian Language in Secondary School.” A full annotated translation appears in a 2004 issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*. In the essay, Bakhtin describes correlations between grammar and stylistic impression, comparing a paratactic sentence by Pushkin to a hypotactic variation of the sentence. The essay explores why hypotactic (complex) sentences are stylistically inferior, or “dry and pallid” when compared to simpler paratactic ones (21). Bakhtin’s larger point is that Russian stylistics lacked a systematic method to account for grammatical forms and their “inherent representation and expressive potential”; moreover, “When we study certain areas of syntax . . . where the speaker or writer may choose between two or more equally grammatically correct syntactic forms,” it is essential to have a way of determining the form that is more appropriate for a given purpose and situation (13). Bakhtin then describes a series of explicit teaching lessons devoted to the stylistic impact of the linguistic features of sentences.

In the issue, Bakhtin scholar Kay Halasek provides a detailed interpretation of the essay and its implications for contemporary writing instruction, namely that “No one style suits all rhetorical situations,” and that there is a “rhetorical effect of grammar” (357–358). Although Bakhtin is sometimes seen as a critic of rhetoric, Halasek cites J. Zappen’s position in the 2004 book, *The Rebirth of Dialogue*, that Bakhtin sought “not to reject but [to] dialogize” rhetoric; as such, the essay reads as an effort to do the same with grammar. She goes on to write, “Our very grammars are dialogic. Linguistics and grammar are not most productively described, Bakhtin argues, in terms of structural

correctness but in terms of stylistic (and, I would argue, rhetorical) appeal and power” (360).

Frank Farmer interprets the essay as a meditation on style as existing not only in literary texts, but also originating from “dialogue, in living language, which in turn is mutually enriched by literary representations” (341). Thus, one major import of Bakhtin’s essay on stylistic pedagogy is that teachers should “acknowledge (and thus honor) the everyday languages that our students bring to the classroom” not only as “sources for more refined literary works but the already present creativity that they possess” (345). It is worth noting, as Farmer references “Students’ Right to their Own Language” (STROL), that contemporary arguments in favor of code-meshing and translanguaging frequently describe the dialogic and heteroglossic dimensions of language as evidence.

In light of his own work on style, Joseph Williams treats Bakhtin’s approach as a series of readers’ reactions or responses to texts, rather than qualities of the writing itself. Although disagreeing with the larger theories of utterances behind Bakhtin’s approach, he asserts agreement with

Bakhtin’s teaching methods: Contrast sentences with similar propositional content expressed in saliently different ways (e.g., parataxis vs. hypotaxis). This methodology is so clearly effective that we should wonder why it’s so widely ignored. Most writing classes offer model sentences, paragraphs, and essays, but when what’s good about them is not specifically contrasted with what might have been bad, students can’t recognize what to avoid and what to emulate. (352)

Williams joins other Bakhtin scholars in endorsing imitation as a valuable pedagogical tool for helping students develop their own styles or voices.

This chapter has explained the significance of dialogic theories of language for the sake of understanding style and voice as inherently diverse. When we talk about style, voice, or their relationship, we should recognize that many styles exist. Every social situation we encounter has its own unique conventions governing language choices that we can interpret as styles of speaking or writing (e.g., diction, sentence length, level of formality, extent of figurative language). These styles are always evolving, and one style can influence another through the



process of dialogism—where writers and speakers appropriate aspects of style when switching from one situation to another. Through dialogic approaches to style, we also come to understand that imitation is not the opposite of originality. In fact, it is through imitating the styles of many others that we develop our own voices. The more authors we see as models, the more we practice and experiment with their styles, and the more mature we become as writers. As the next chapter shows, style also overlaps with grammar—another issue that teachers sometimes see as antithetical or somehow subordinate to style. However, this book hopes to show how style, voice, and grammar ultimately inform one another—a complete understanding of style relies on seeing the connections between these three lenses on language.