

Lost and Found in Punctuation: Hearing John Shotter

Gail Simon
Luton, UK

It's late at night and I'm sitting at my desk, scrolling up and down on two large monitors, checking the final proof of John's latest book, "*Speaking, Actually: Towards a New 'Fluid' Common-Sense Understanding of Relational Becomings.*" John's drafts are always highly finished. He considers the structure and sound of every sentence, of every paragraph, of every page and chapter. His many careful italics are not simply intended to emphasise content but are his way of vocalising so as to show the reader something particular in the hope that we will see it too. The italics are part of John's dialogical vocabulary in that he uses them to show the reader how another writer or speaker can be understood. This linguistic punctuation is a relational act, which I think of as dialogical acoustics. People often don't realise that John is speaking (to us) when he is writing. His works need to be heard when read. This means readers can afford to pace themselves and not burden themselves with the expectation that his writing must be read at a steady pace, as if each phrase should be simultaneously understood. This style of writing is not simply a "John" thing. It is inspired by the intricate intimacies he is attempting to show us. John's writing troubles our expectations of what it means to read (and relate) *in time*. His retellings of complex relational episodes are stretched out in time. These italics, his new wordings, his reflections on relational responsiveness, his chosen quotations to take us a little further, may be *read* in real time and experienced in a slower, unfolding of shifting comprehension. This is John's own form of philosophical inquiry.

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293).

And it is the quotations in *Speaking, Actually* that I am re-visiting right now. The screens are bright, I am tired, but the words are awake. I want to re-format the quotes so they are seen and, therefore, heard differently than simply blending in with the main body of the text. Mary Gergen has called them John's textual friends. I think of these writers as John's conversational partners. In the main, they are *friends* he cites in so much as he builds on their ideas, finds something of value on which he can elaborate, often offering examples from dialogue. But as I am reading up and down through the chapters, it feels as if John has convened an extraordinary party. He is the host and he is introducing us one by one to some of the gifts of these party goers, and like all good hosts, he is aesthetically turning to someone else, bringing them into the conversation by connecting with their interests. I want to describe this as weaving together of ideas but that feels too dehumanising, too conceptual. This writing with friends and colleagues feels more of a social activity – as well as being a master wordsmith. I feel I have been invited, through this reading and formatting, to a party where the colours and shapes in the room are startling in their richness and at the same time make complete sense to me. But the engagement invites an inevitable sensual reorienting to those around me, a gentle invitation to reflexivity about how I coordinate in the talks I have with others at home, at work and in my dreams. This

reading moves me. And I am not the person I was while reading the last paragraph. But the writing is not the same either. As it moves me, I move it into other places where it takes on new meanings and possibilities.

John is one of the original social constructionists who really understood – and could show – how we are influencing our realities in the doing of relationship with each other. His writings, his performances, his gift of having designed and taught on the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice with Peter Lang at KCC in London and the University of Bedfordshire, serve to validate the development of relationally sensitive methods of inquiry into human practices which honour contextual ways of knowing, doing and being.

His writing is “more than cool reason” (Shotter, 2012). It has been a form of activism. I imagine it has required much stamina to sustain the writing of these relational truths against the dominant arrogance in much of positivist psychology and the social sciences. But then, John’s writings find an appreciative audience. Well, many audiences, actually. When we met for the “Performing John Shotter” celebration of John and his work at the University of Bedfordshire in October 2016, I was struck by the number of passionate people present and how many countries around the world could have staged parallel events because John has worldwide and transdisciplinary communities who live with his writings. These writings live because practitioners and academics recognise the useful impact on their noticings in their everyday relationships and contexts. The special re-orienting of how to go on within the living dialogical movements of relationship rather than investigate after-the-event from an aboutness position, invites us all to slow down and consider the relational ethics and implications of assuming an aboutness position.

I feel so lucky to have lived in this era, with John Shotter’s texts to help me counter the modernist expectation of perfecting psychotherapeutic and research methods as if aiming for miracle endpoints, and instead found, through another kind of miracle, the ordinary being rendered extraordinary by this man, John Shotter.

References

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. (C. Emerson, & M. Holquist (Eds.), Trans.). Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Shotter, J. (2012). More than cool reason: ‘Witness-thinking’ and ‘systemic thinking’ and ‘thinking about systems.’ *International Journal of Collaborative Practices*, 3(1), 1-13.
- Shotter, J. (2016). *Speaking, actually: Towards a new ‘fluid’ common-sense understanding of relational becomings*. Farnhill: Everything is Connected Press.

Author Note:

Gail Simon
 University of Bedfordshire
 Email: GAIL.SIMON@beds.ac.uk