



Shifting voices in

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Joseph Wilson and Adam Axbey look at the linguistic complexity of the popular role-playing game

My companions and I are hunkered down in the Black Water Tavern. There are direwolves outside and we're planning our defense. "Grrrr, I hate direwolves!" says Goren Stoneforge, a dwarf from the mountain district, in a thick Scottish brogue, "ever since that summer I spent in The Meadows..."

He pauses for dramatic effect.

"Wait... sorry, I have another question," I say, breaking the mood. "Do I have to do an accent when it's my turn?" Adam, our Dungeon Master (DM), patiently explains that an accent isn't necessary, but somehow, I still need to let everyone know what my character is thinking and doing in order to drive the story along. He signals to the players that they can continue. Nadya enters the scene next, emerging from the mist outside the bar,

speaking in an airy Romanian accent; she seems to know a little too much about these wolves.

It's my first time playing Dungeons & Dragons. One of the things that marks my participation as a novice is my confusion with the shifts in 'voicing' performed by the other players. Sometimes they speak in first-person as the characters they have chosen, often with an accent, and sometimes they speak in third-person to narrate the action in their natural speaking voice. We are encouraged to say things at any point in the game to add to the story but need to wait for our own turn to perform an 'action'. Sometimes my companions debate the rules of the game with highly specific jargon about 'bonus action' and 'armour class'. And then someone will remove themselves from the game altogether by announcing they need some more chips.

Creating a voice

Speakers use a wide range of techniques to establish different voices for different personas in everyday conversation. They can use features of speech such as pitch, intonation, accent, and rhythm to invoke stock characters like 'the valley girl' or 'the nerd', or to parody the speech of a specific politician or celebrity. Shifts in voice can also be accomplished through the selection of specific words or syntax. My vocabulary as a father is very different to my vocabulary as a graduate student.

The world of D&D is pre-populated with a range of stock character types that are immediately recognisable to its players. The choice to play as a wizard, a druid, or a fighter brings with it a bundle of character traits that are well-known to fans of the fantasy genre. When animating these characters in the game, players tend to choose voices that draw

upon tropes that have been established through decades of fantasy narratives, from Lord of the Rings to Game of Thrones.

My friend gave Goren Stoneforge a low, growly voice with an angry Scottish accent and peppered his speech with words like 'smite' and 'ale'. When I hear him say, "I'll smash him with my battle-axe!", I know that the 'I' in the sentence refers to the character and not to the person uttering the words.

Heteroglossia

A wide range of voices appear in our D&D game. Literary critic Mikael Bakhtin describes this mish-mash of voices, often deployed by the same person in different contexts, as heteroglossia. First-person narratives, like that of my dwarf companion, are often reserved for moments of maximum drama, such as the climax of a battle or a sudden twist in the story. Sometimes, players would give voices to objects, vocalising the "Thwack!" made by a sword or the creak of a slowly opening door.

Often, when players perform less dramatic actions such as inspecting a room, they shift to a more neutral third-person voice, like that of an omniscient narrator in a novel. They lose the accent and say something like, 'Goren and Strider walk down the hallway and approach the tomb'. This shift in voicing seems to index a greater distance from the drama unfolding in the game and suggests a greater focus on game mechanics like rolling dice or choosing which spell to cast.

Even further distant from the drama are voices that comment on the rules of the game or argue about what is permitted. These are meta-voices that lie somewhere 'above' the game, commenting on how things are

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unfolding. Sometimes they're phrased as questions in need of answers such as "Can I use my bonus action now?" or accusations such as "You were supposed to use the four-sided die!" This can quickly lead down an epistemological rabbit hole: does your character know the rules of the game? Can an in-game character rely on knowledge a player might have of how the DM likes to run his or her games?

Contextualisation cues

Somewhere buried in this heteroglossia are the voices of my friends. When I hear someone say, "What time is it?" I think to myself 'Who's asking? The character or the friend?' To answer as a friend would plunge everyone back into the reality of their everyday lives and break the spell of the game-world

narrative. In the game-world, however, I worry that this is a coded message I don't fully understand. Is checking the time considered an action in D&D? Is there a time-limit by which we need to escape this castle?

To make things even more complicated, some players (like yours truly) are too shy to wield an archetypical accent and instead use their own voice as that of their character, something Bakhtin called double-voicing: you're speaking as your character but also as yourself at the same time. One of my companions, Strider, is a paladin (a kind of knight) who has a voice that is indistinguishable from that of my friend Craig. It makes it hard to tell if I'm talking to Craig or to Strider at any given moment; not to mention whether I'm talking to him as me or as my character.

At one point Adam tells me that my character has "panache". At first I am flattered by his use of such a precise and obscure word to compliment my character, but then I realise I have a pre-determined Skill on my character-sheet called "Panache", a bundle of attributes that have an effect on how my dice-rolls are counted.

To avoid confusion, when people want to signal a shift in voice, they usually include contextualisation cues. In written media like articles, quotation marks are used to distinguish the voice of the writer from the voice of an interviewee, alongside explicit framing devices such as 'She said...' In novels, quotation marks or dashes are used in the same way to distinguish voices from that of the narrator, who is often another character in the story, and is distinct yet again from the person who actually wrote the book.

Body language

The problem is that contextualisation cues are themselves contextual. That is, different cues are used in different social situations, and members of a community are expected to know them. Part of what defines a person's social competence in a particular setting is their ability to navigate the subtle cues that are used to differentiate voices.

For example, when speaking, people often use air quotes as a cue that a passage of reported speech is beginning, but in other contexts they can be used to signify irony. Changes in prosody, or rhythm, along with pitch, volume, and voice quality, are all variables that speakers use to represent different voices to an audience that knows what they represent.

Speakers also use their bodies to animate different voices, including exaggerated facial expressions, body language, and the direction of their gaze. Because we were playing in the middle of a global pandemic, we opted to meet online, making it even more difficult for me to distinguish the voices of my D&D collaborators. I couldn't see how their body language supported their choice of voice, nor follow their gaze to see who they were addressing. In a face-to-face setting, if someone were to say, 'I need a beer', and turn their head towards the fridge, then their intention would be clear. But considering our characters started the game in a tavern, the same phrase could be interpreted as an in-game action.

Choreographing voices

In the absence of such physical cues, someone needs to guide the interpretation of voices. The Dungeon Master, as the person who runs the game, can be



Dungeons and Dragons board and dice

thought of as the choreographer of the different voices that are possible. In our session, Adam often pushed people to clarify whether the things they said were 'in character'. If the DM introduces a new character and someone mutters, 'I don't trust her', does she hear it? Does she get offended? When my companions and I tried to coordinate an attack on a particular monster, Adam, speaking as the monster, reminded us, "I can hear you. This is going to change how I defend myself."

The DM also shifts in and out of different voices themselves, from narrating the story in third-person, to explicitly telling players what they can or cannot do. Often, Adam would shift into the voice of a particular character without warning, just to keep us on our toes. He spoke to us as an English butler, a centuries-old vampire, and a jolly tavern bartender who knew a little more than he was letting on.

Playing with voices

As the game progresses, it occurs to me that the ambiguity of the shifting voices is not a problem to be solved but is part of what makes the game fun. Playing

with different voices allows us to experiment with different personas, make jokes, and explore alternate narratives.

Because voices can be so distinctive, it can be fun to import voices that people recognise from films or books in the fantasy/sci-fi canon. Adam welcomes voices from other worlds as a way to scaffold the building of a character. Because I didn't know how to build a D&D character from scratch, I chose the character Madmartigan, the loveable mercenary from the film Willow, as my scaffold. "Oh, so you're a Rogue", said Adam, matching me up to one of the stock characters in the D&D universe, "let's see what kind of attributes he might have."

The DM plays a delicate role here, encouraging voice-play in a way that still maintains the cohesion of our collective fictional world. The presence of too many imported voices, like a mish-mash of quips from Monty Python, Star Wars, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, can take players out of the game world. Too much focus on the meta-voices of pop culture can be annoying for players looking to spend an evening immersed in character.

How to do things with words

One of the common properties of the voices of all the in-game characters was their use of what philosopher J. L. Austin called 'explicit performatives'. These are a class of speech acts that allow people to accomplish legally binding or socially consequential things just by saying them. Think of a priest saying 'I hereby declare you husband and wife', or a president-elect swearing an oath to 'faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States'. By saying the words, the action has occurred; the president-elect actually becomes the President.

When the game is being played, explicit performatives said in certain voices have consequences. To officially spend one's turn attacking a monster, a player needs to say something like 'I attack the vampire with my broad-sword', and then roll the associated dice. It's strange to imagine a person narrating their own actions in real life – 'I walk down the stairs', 'I move to the other side of the room' – but in a game that exists entirely in the mind, as our online version of D&D does, it is necessary in order to establish a shared world.

The DM's role here, as the choreographer of voices, is to clarify whether a player is using their voice to 'lock in' a certain action, or whether they are merely thinking out loud. Words, when uttered in the right voice at the right time, have an almost magical power to accomplish things.

The ritual of game play

As the game progressed, I learned where and when to use certain voices to both perform in-game actions and bond with my friends. As a new player, I was gently guided through the confusing heteroglossia with a mix of explicit instructions from

Adam ("Roll the four-sided dice now") and implicit signals from the other players ("Joe, I think you might have an interesting response here"). Guiding new players as to when to use certain voices is part of the process of socialisation into the ritual of gameplay.

Back in the Black Water Tavern, the direwolves are drawing closer. Goren has just engaged one of them in combat. He makes a good roll, and Adam realises that victory is close. "How do you kill him?" he asks, a narrative prompt that encourages Goren to describe, in gory, first-person detail, the fatal blow he strikes. Known as 'spotlight time', Adam explains that, "it's a pretty common DM technique to make sure everyone gets a chance to shine in some way." Think of it as a voicing solo, an opportunity for the dwarf from the mountain district to extend the range of his voice and hit some new notes.

Beyond the magic circle

Finally, sometime after midnight we wrap things up. "I need some sleep you guys," utters Strider the paladin, an unambiguous shift of voice away from the drama of the game. Adam improvises a conclusion to the narrative arc and our avatars make their exit. The magic circle, the time and space carved out from real life in which gameplay occurs, has been broken and we're left with empty chip bowls and sore backs.

But the play of voices continues in the real world. One of the things that allows us to achieve communicative competence in all social situations is the ability to master shifts in voicing. Whether quoting pop culture memes or reporting on the speech of others, effective communicators embrace heteroglossia as a

rhetorical technique to engage others in conversation. Plus, as my Blackwater Tavern companions would no doubt agree, it can be fun to see where these voices take us.

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Find out more

Books

For more on voice, heteroglossia, and double-voicing, check out:

Mikhael Bakhtin (1981) *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, University of Texas Press.

For more on explicit performatives and the performative power of words, check out:

J. L. Austin (1962) *How to Do Things with Words*, Harvard University Press

Online

One way to get a sense of the use of voice in D&D is to watch one of the many games online. Better yet, assemble some friends and launch your own campaign!

Misfits and Magic:
youtu.be/C1VffF1Z5-Y

Fantasy High:
youtu.be/_zZxCVBi7-k

Critical Role:
youtu.be/byvaohOj8CU

Begin your own campaign at dicebreaker.com/games/dungeons-and-dragons