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Lara Vapnyar's "A Question for Vera" and Natalya Baranskaya's "The Woman with the Umbrella" are strikingly different stories. "A Question for Vera" examines a young girl's introduction to her Jewish heritage, while "The Woman with the Umbrella" relates a group of vacationers' strange encounter with a university professor. Although Vapnyar's "A Question for Vera" and Baranskaya's "The Woman with the Umbrella" are so distinctly separate in plot from each other, communication and perception play central roles in both stories. Both skilled at the craft, Vapnyar and Baranskaya manipulate dialogue to emphasize the way communication affects perception.

Lara Vapnyar's protagonist in "A Question for Vera", Katya, perceives herself as different only after she is told so by another classmate. It is Katya's interaction with Ira that forces her to acknowledge her heritage and alters her perception of herself. Initially, Katya acknowledges differences in her classmates, but does not perceive herself as different. Vapnyar illustrates this with Katya's classmate, Vova Libman. Katya observes that Vova is unlike his male classmates because he cries often, however this perception of Vova is based on Katya's communication with her teacher. Vapnyar writes, "Each day Elena Borisovna said to him, 'A boy crying! What a sight!'...Vova Libman didn't care if he was a boy or a girl; he cried all the time. He cried, and when he calmed down, he picked his nose and ate his boogers" (80-1). Katya's perception of Vova as different is only formed after Elena Borisovna's communication with the class. Although the phrase

is only written once, it is implied that it is a repeated phrase, which emphasizes Vova's difference. The repetition of dialogue is a technique Vapnyar uses again.

Prior to her interaction with Ira, Katya acknowledges her appearance, but does not find herself different from her classmates, rather she recognizes the similarity between her best friend, Aziza, and herself. Vapnyar distinctly mentions that Katya is different from the princesses that Katya and Aziza pretend to be, but emphasizes their similarities, "Most often, they pretended to be beautiful princesses like the ones they saw in picture books—beautiful princesses with golden braids streaming to their feet, even though both Katya and Aziza had closely cropped black hair"(81). Preceding Katya and Ira's conversation, Katya is ignorant to these differences. Vapnyar again illustrates the difference between Katya and the princesses she imagines by having Katya draw a picture of her pretend princess. Vapnyar writes, " She kneeled ...drawing. She made two straight, thick yellow lines for the princess's braids. When she was younger, she used to start with the princess's eyes. Later she realized that it was much easier to start with the braids"(82). The description of the 'improvement' of Katya's technique suggest how frequent an occurrence her drawing pictures of princesses was, without giving it a second thought as to how different they appeared from herself. However, Vapnyar illustrates Katya's difference in appearance from her princesses' by repeating the image of the golden braids. It is not until Ira's interference, their communication, that Katya's perception is altered.

The first dialogue in the story is between Ira and Katya. By omitting dialogue prior to their interaction and by emphasizing Katya's ignorance about her different heritage, Vapnyar suggests that dialogue and in turn, communication, are what alter

Katya's perception. Ira behaves condescendingly towards Katya and Katya accepts Ira as an authority because of the way Ira presents herself. As Vapnyar describes Ira, "Ira was big. She was the tallest kid in their class, with a round face, rosy cheeks, and strict grey eyes. Ira claimed that she had read *War and Peace*...Ira Baranovna was a recognized authority on life" (83). Though Katya's perception of Ira is not based solely on what Ira expresses about herself, Ira's authority is predominantly derived from a, most likely, exaggerated account of her linguistic ability, and presumably as a result her ability to communicate.

The first few times Ira speaks to Katya, Vapnyar does not write that Katya responds, rather she interjects with narration. This illustrates the one-sidedness of their conversation and thus the influence Ira's communication has on Katya's perception. The first interaction they have is Ira asserting her dominance in the situation by giving Katya orders. Throughout their entire interaction, Katya only speaks twice. As Ira lists Katya's Jewish 'traits', Katya begins to perceive differences in her appearance. Katya immediately accepts that her eyes are different, however, she questions the difference of her nose, but with further illustration by Ira, Katya's perception is quickly changed. Vapnyar writes, "Now, look at your nose.' Katya looked, but didn't see anything alarming. Her nose wasn't big; it was even smaller than Ira's. But then she saw Ira's finger in the mirror tracing the outline of Katya's nose. 'You see, it's pointed down, not up.' That was true"(84). As a result of her conversation with Ira, Katya perceives Jewish-ness as a negative characteristic. Vapnyar repeats the phrase, "Your eyes are too big. It's not normal" (84, 85). The repetitions of this phrase, once when Ira first says it and once in Katya's mind, emphasizes the impact Ira's conversation has on young Katya.

Katya also recalls her mother's interaction with a saleswoman that furthers her perception that being Jewish is bad, "Once, when Katya was in a vegetable store with her mother, a saleswoman had yelled at one of the customers: 'Stop picking the good ones! Stop your 'Jewish' tricks!'" (85). This interjection of remembered dialogue enforces Katya's perception of Jewish-ness.

The way Ira speaks to Katya, with limited verbal response, is mimicked by the way Katya later speaks to Vera, who as a doll is unable to respond. Katya projects her feelings of alienation on to her favorite class toy, Vera. Katya repeats the idea that a large eye is characteristic of being Jewish, "There is a very good chance that you are Jewish too." Katya moved Vera closer to her face. 'Look at your eyes! Sorry, at your eye. Look how big and round it is. Do you think this is normal? No, it's not.'" (90). Katya goes from admiring the doll and likening her to her favorite actress to berating her for being Jewish. Katya becomes frustrated with the doll, but Vera's inability to communicate forces Katya to question why she was so quick to assume being Jewish was bad. Vapnyar ends the story with, "What if Vera, the doll, was right that there wasn't anything bad or special about being Jewish? Katya looked around. There was nobody to answer that question. Nobody at all"(90). Although Katya questions her new perception of Jewish-ness, there is no one to communicate with to challenge or confirm this.

Written in 1981, over two decades before Vapnyar's "A Question for Vera", Natalya Baranskaya's "The Woman with the Umbrella" also examines the influence communication has in perception. Baranskaya plays with perception and dialogue in multiple ways, direct, omitted, and the presentation of dialogue. Baranskaya introduces each character with a line of dialogue. This technique aids in the reader's perception of

each character. The first instance of this is her introduction of Duschenka. Baranskaya says, "Isn't our lake delightful?" said a plump blonde woman with a new rosy tan" (199). A few lines later, Baranskaya reveals the woman is Professor Duzhin's wife. Her initial dialogue portrays the character as superficial, which is emphasized later in her perception of the woman with the umbrella. Using this same technique, Baranskaya presents Professor Duzhin as slightly condescending and she portrays the Fishers' similarity by having them both open with lines about fishing. This conversation does not necessarily alter the characters' perceptions of each other, but establishes the characters and the reader's perceptions of the characters.

The characters, especially the older characters, are quick to make assumptions about the woman with the umbrella. Dushenka, again, is the first to comment saying, "The poor thing, I feel so sorry for her, she's obviously deranged" (201). Dushenka, as her initial dialogue suggests she would, makes a superficial observation about the woman's mental state based on her appearance. The vacationers continue to muse and mock the woman. The older characters also place an emphasis on Sofia Levovna's marital status, as if to suggest being single, a 'spinster' adds to her perceived insanity. It is only Ira, the young female vacationer that challenges their mocking. In order to determine who is accurate in their perception of the woman, Igor goes to talk to her. While this is happening, Baranskaya alters her presentation of dialogue.

Baranskaya manipulates the dialogue to appear almost like a play. This presentation of dialogue mocks the characters. It presents them as extreme characterizations; similar to the way their introductory dialogue does, suggesting their dialogue and perceptions are almost predetermined, like characters in a play. In this

section of dialogue, the characters alternate narrating the action between Igor and the woman, whose name is Sofia Levovna Kerostkaya. Baranskaya repeats this technique in the end of the story. While Igor and Ira defend Sofia Levovna, they omit details of her past, as if to suggest, in the same way Baranskaya's play-like dialogue does, that the perceptions the older characters have about Sofia Levovna are predetermined.

Baranskaya manipulates dialogue by omitting it. This suggests that a lack of communication can also help determine perception. Sofia Levovna does not directly converse with anyone; rather those interactions are not presented in "The Woman with the Umbrella". Her only dialogue is the nursery rhyme she sings to herself and the information presented to the group of vacationers is second hand. This is another technique Baranskaya uses to illustrate the importance of dialogue in perception. By depicting the absence of dialogue between Sofia Levovna and the other characters in the story, Baranskaya demonstrates how a lack of dialogue, communication, can also have an impact on perception.

While Baranskaya's "The Woman with the Umbrella" and Vapnyar's "A Question for Vera" are two very different stories, both writers play with dialogue. Though their techniques are also extremely varied, both Baranskaya and Vapnyar use dialogue to illustrate the impact communication has on perception.