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## **Beyond Barriers: Activity, Culture, Language, Personality (II)**

In Memory of A.A. Leontiev

Guest Editor:  
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DOROTHY ROBBINS

## Guest Editor's Introduction

A.A. Leontiev's books *Slovo v rechevoi deiatel'nosti. Nekotorye problemy obshchei teorii rechevoi deiatel'nosti* (*Word in Speech Activity: Some Problems of the General Theory of Speech Activity*) and *Psikholingvisticheskie edinitsy i porozhdenie rechevogo vyskazyvaniia* (*Linguistic Units and the Generation of Speech Utterances*) were first published thirty-seven years ago.<sup>1</sup> Although his ideas are most contemporary and fresh today, readers should not expect a direct correlation between all applied/psycholinguistic terms used in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the terms used today. Parts of his two books have been translated for this issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* in order to make his theories better known around the world. Readers are asked to place Leontiev's thoughts within context that is wider than contemporary, Western applied/psycholinguistic theory. In this issue, Aleksei Alekseevich Leontiev offers a global/local approach to the study of psycholinguistics, always placing the micro level of analysis within a wider system of language. "For us, a language system is neither a text structure, nor an 'individual' language system of speech behavior, nor a pure construct: it is the actual form of interaction among the elements of speech activity that can be interpreted using various models." One of the key aspects in understanding Leontiev's works is the focus on the role of "function" within various language systems. In understanding language as a system, Leontiev was well versed in the theories of Luria, using many examples from his studies in aphasia. A.A. Leontiev often referred to the theories of N. Bernstein, including a physiological component in his psycholinguistics, and he included many other areas of interest. Aleksei Alekseevich was also well versed in poetry, film, advertising, comparisons of foreign languages, and so on, areas from which he would often draw analogies.

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In terms of describing language as a system, it was just as important to understand components such as “units” and “sign.” In the West, our linguistic/semiotic analysis of such complexes often remains isolated. In Leontiev’s understanding, there is a feeling of wholeness where the “parts” and the “whole” interact and are viewed as connected. His focus is on consciousness as a personality, the integrity of the entire person/society, and the link between inner and external structuring can be found in activity, including speech activity. In other words, what he emphasized was “the system-forming role of consciousness in relation to the entirety of activities; and second, the double-sided interdependence between the dynamic of the internal structure of consciousness and the dynamic of the structure of activity.”<sup>2</sup> In looking at “units,” it is interesting to note that A.N. Leontiev did not place quotation marks around his understanding of units, with activity being a holistic, nonadditive unit. A.A. Leontiev speaks of “units” and “levels,” and these aspects are of secondary importance in comparison with the problem of the system of language, which is objective. He also introduces the difference between “system” and “norm.” Inside a “system” there is an aggregate of language phenomena that serves a specific function in language, usually the function of distinction (often with oppositions). A “norm” in a language is an aggregate set of language phenomena that does not carry an immediate distinguishing function in language, taking the form of common and generally accepted (traditional) realizations.

Clearly, our knowledge of language is mediated by a system of units; however, they do not represent individual, unrelated units and levels. The language system exists before the unit, with the understanding that the unit is organized by the linguist, psychologist, and so forth. It is important that units or elements forming the system be clearly distinguished from the system itself. For example: “systemic development of the phonetic aspect of language is not, in principle, tied to any particular phonological theory or to any particular understanding of the phoneme.” In semiotic theory in the West we speak of a “sign,” which often appears to be a static term, although there are hundreds of definitions of this concept. A.A. Leontiev, however, referred to “sign systems,” “sign operations,” and the like, as a process, which can only be activated in activity. At the same time, he was most specific in contrasting the “real sign” with the “virtual sign.” “A virtual sign refers to certain features of activity divorced from specific sign operations and attributed to the corresponding material object that is fixed in a sign form; it concerns activities objectified in a sign. A real sign is an element of a specific sign operation.” Leontiev held the opinion that the solution to the problem of “materiality” in language can be found in the distinction between real and

virtual signs. He also offered specific types of language utterances (i.e., physiological, psychological, and linguistic), with interrelated categories that often differ from a Western approach. One of the differences between Leontiev's approach and that often taken in the West is that his psycholinguistic theories are tied to the concept of methodology. When analyzing components of activity theory, such as motives, images, codes (Zhinkin), goals, actions, operations, and so on, or analyzing speech acts, Leontiev placed many of his theories within a framework of methodology. Therefore, instead of speaking of speech acts alone, for example, we are dealing with a speech program.

As a psycholinguist, A.A. Leontiev is well known for his theories on inner speech, inner articulation/pre-speech (*vnutrennee progovarivanie*), and inner programming. In summary, inner speech is "speech action moved 'inside,' that is, produced in a compact, reduced form. In a typical situation, it emerges during the solving of a problem. . . . Inner speech is most often accompanied by inner articulation in cases where it is closest to conversational, discursive speech." Inner programming is the "unconscious construction of a certain scheme on the basis of which a speech utterance will be generated in the future." What is the defining role of inner programming and speech production? "The difference between them is the difference between the intermediate link in the process of speech generation and the final link. In other words, internal programming can unfold either in external speech (bypassing inner speech), or in inner speech, depending on the functional specialization of certain other factors."

A.A. Leontiev also analyzed research on memory regarding psycholinguistics, viewing aspects such as situational memory, memory of necessity, program memory, content memory, form memory, native-language memory, and operational memory. He brought his thoughts in line with neuropsychological findings, and it is interesting to note the following related to memory: "when there is a delay in the storage of utterances, it is not the utterance as such that is stored, but its program."

I will close with a short summary, paraphrased, on meaning and sense from the book *Psycholinguistic Units and the Production of Speech Utterances* (1969): "The continuous process of programming, which the subject places inside the code units, is not meaning. Meaning is directly dependent on the structure of a particular language, whereas inner programming is accepted in the sense of being 'supralinguistic.' Meaning is objective, unconnected with the structure of activity—it is merely included in the structure without undergoing a substantial transformation. Together with its psychological status, a viable program must enter into the system of activity, inter-

act, and interrelate with the components of this system. According to A.N. Leontiev, the analogue of meaning in a system of activity is *sense*. It would seem to follow that it is exactly the continual aspect of the program that has a 'sense' nature."

A.A. Leontiev's psycholinguistics is intrinsically tied to an overall understanding of Vygotsky's psychology/philosophy and A.N. Leontiev's activity theory. Just as Vygotskian psychology is viewed as "height," nonclassical psychology, Aleksei Alekseevich has now become a historical figure within this tradition. His psycholinguistic theories are to be placed within a holistic system/program that deals with very precise details, including the important aspects of *disobjectification* (important for A.N. Leontiev) and *mediation* (important for Vygotsky). At the same time, the overall focus of his theories relates to the transformation of individuals within cultures as well as the transformation of cultures. He focused on the complete personality of an individual and the cultural heritage of a society.

In closing, we will remember A.A. Leontiev with Sir Thomas Wyatt's poem Leontiev translated from English to Russian in his book *Dobryi gorod*:

I am as I am and so will I be.  
 But how that I am none knoweth truly,  
 Be it evil, be it well, be I bound, be I free,  
 I am as I am and so will I be.

## Notes

1. A.A. Leont'ev [Leontiev], *Slovo v rechevoi deiatel'nosti. Nekotorye problemy obshchei teorii rechevoi deiatel'nosti*, 2d ed. (Moscow: URSS, 2003); *Psikholingvisticheskie edinitsy i porozhdenie rechevogo vyskazyvaniia*, 2d ed. (Moscow: URSS, 2003).

2. A.A. Leont'ev, "'Units' and Levels of Activity," *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, vol. 44, no. 3 (May–June 2006), p. 34.