Argument for Retaining "Word Meaning" as a Unit of Analysis

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Dorothy (Dot) Robbins

Introduction

Vygotsky's method allowed for a developmental process to take place, so that his conception of word meaning , as a complete unit of analysis, could be used in better understanding the vast concept of consciousness. Vygotsky in Kozulin (1994) stated that " . . . the word brings us to the threshold of a wider and deeper subject, i.e., the problem of the relation between word and consciousness . . . Thought and speech turn out to be the key to the nature of human consciousness " (p. 256).

James Wertsch1 (1985a) approaches word meaning as a unit of analysis from the side of Western psychology by formulating the problem in understandable terms. Wertsch's baseline argument could be interpreted in the following way: if consciousness is to be analyzed with the inclusion of accompanying features that are subjective in nature (i.e., emotions, motivation, etc.), then psychologists cannot conduct traditional experiments because these internal features cannot be statistically verified. He states that "while word meaning may be a unit for analyzing the semantic mediation of human consciousness , it is not a unit of analyzing human consciousness itself" (p. 198). Throughout history, consciousness has been defined as the non-definable, and human beings as knowing subjects cannot observe or analyze themselves outside of consciousness (or language). Indeed this was William James's opinion when he stated that he was not sure if consciousness existed.2 It is at this point that Wertsch (1985a) discounts word meaning as an efficient unit of analysis:

Given the central role that dynamic interfunctional relationships play in the macrocosm of consciousness, one must know how they are reflected in the microcosm of word meaning. In fact, they are not reflected there. In no sense are mental functions such as memory or attention, let alone their interrelationships, reflected in word meaning . . . When one considers all these problems, it becomes clear that Vygotsky's account of word meaning is not a good unit for analyzing the development of human consciousness. (pp.196-198)

It is clear that if word meaning is indeed a microcosm of consciousness, then word meaning cannot be understood to completely reflect higher mental functions as separate entities of individuals because consciousness for Vygotsky is primarily social; and on the individual level, word meaning incorporates sense over meaning which is a dynamic, changing aspect continually being modified. This understanding today would reflect the holographic approach in various sciences. Individual consciousness emerges as a result of interaction of sign mediation, language concept formation, activity, etc., all leading to higher, asymmetrical, mental processes. Language, then, is no longer viewed in the Saussurian sense of a system of signs hardly affecting change within society or the individual. Language is a powerful tool, which can ultimately be used for subsequent internalization-appropriation-mastery, and it will have an effect on perception, memory, imagination, volition, etc., and it is ultimately understood for self-regulation. Hence, word meaning is a complex structure ultimately as hard to grasp as consciousness itself, and its purpose is that of mediation. Therefore, quotes such as the one from Wertsch (1985a) can cause much confusion. For example, "while word meaning may be a unit of analyzing the semiotic mediation of human consciousness , it is not a unit for analyzing human consciousness itself" (p.196). This is a preliminary statement used as a justification for renouncing word meaning as a unit of analysis, to be replaced by action as a unit of analysis. However, action or tool-mediated action does not fit the basic requirement of analyzing Vygotsky's understanding of consciousness, which focuses on speech and thought (also understood as action) as the psychological tools of analysis. There is an assumption made by Wertsch that Vygotsky is attempting to analyze nouema , or the Ding-an-sich , or the absolute of absolutes, without mediation, which is humanly impossible. Vygotsky (1987) clearly stated that "the communication of consciousness can be accomplished only indirectly through a mediated path" (p.282). Viewing consciousness directly would be like trying to understand child concept formation only with the child's description of it while at the same time undergoing the process. Bakhurst (1986) has given an interesting account of such a process, stating that "we have no idea how to imagine what it is like to develop the ability to imagine, to think about what it is like to come to be able to think, hope, want, believe, intend, etc. And we have no idea not through a lack of imagination, but because there is simply no idea to have" (pp.117-118). This statement is similar to the problem of consciousness, and in the end, it has already been mentioned that social consciousness for Vygotsky is primary, with human consciousness being secondary. Vygotsky stated that consciousness is reflected in a word as the sun in a drop of water , which does not imply that he would attempt to take a drop of water to study the properties of the sun. Rather, he is speaking metaphorically. As well, the view of Wertsch and others tends to position word meaning as an atomized unit, existing in a non-socialized, non-temporal, non-dialectical-developmental word, such as a monad or an island. Word meaning, inner speech, meaning-sense, can be unraveled to a certain point, then they automatically turn into subjective components such as emotions all originating from the un(or pre)conscious. Within the remnants of the behaviorist mode of Western psychology there is an unequivocal disregard for placing the study of consciousness within experimental parameters. This is often left to the realms of Freud, hence therapeutic approaches

in psychoanalysis, which means that many conclusions regarding consciousness remain outside the realm of experimental research.

Vygotsky's (1971) understood that higher mental processes also originate from the un(sub)conscious, and that art and aesthetics could be one solution to the traditional (Freudian) approach to the mystery of humankind. "Art as the subconscious is a problem: art as the social solution for the subconscious is its likely solution" (p.85). Within this approach there is a longing for specifying, observing and better understanding the internal mechanisms of human consciousness. Therefore, there is agreement with Wertsch's (1985a) conclusion that "while word meaning may be a unit for analyzing the semiotic mediation of human consciousness, it is not a unit for analyzing human consciousness itself" (p.196), although this is what Vygotsky meant himself. However, since there is no single unit available to analyze human consciousness immediately, it is not agreed that word meaning as a unit of analysis must be replaced by other units, such as action.

Vygotsky (in Kozulin, 1994) then described "units" as being: products of analysis that correspond to specific aspects of the phenomena under investigation. And unlike elements, units retain and express the essence of the whole being analyzed . . . We found this unit of verbal thought in word meaning. Word meaning is an elementary "cell" that cannot be further analyzed and that represents the most elementary form of the unity between thought and word.

(p. 212)

A unit can also be referred to as a "cell" which bears an interesting resemblance to the idea of concrete universal.3 The argument that follows will deal with concrete universals directly. Bakhurst (1991) paraphrases E.V. Ilyenkov, claiming that there are different interpretations of the understanding of concrete universals, in particular if the reader is from a non-dialectical background:

The classical empiricist tradition, for example, treats the universal as a special kind of idea, general in form, embodying the common characteristics of the diverse particulars subsumed under it. On this view, the universal stands to the particular as species to individual. For Ilyenkov, however, the universal, understood concretely, can itself be a particular, existing along-side the other particular components of the whole of which it is the "cell." (p.142)

For the empiricist, according to Ilyenkov, cognition moves from concrete to abstract with the concrete being particular, which is then derived from perceptual images, with the abstract not being given in individual experience. He then attacked this understanding, stating that the formation of concepts is derived from the data of perception, and he accused the empiricist of standing close to Platonism. Within the empiricist tradition, abstraction is derived from sense experience, ultimately serving the formation of conceptual schemes. Ilyenkov suggested that "for each individual, the starting point of cognition is not unprocessed sense experience but a conception of the world inherited ‘ready made' from the community of which he or she is a member."4 The following quote from Bakhurst (1991) is viewed as pivotal in understanding the generalized Russian position:

On the empiricist's model, the content of a concept, or the meaning of a word, determines all its possible applications: The rails "stretch to infinity.” Thus, grasping the concept is a guarantee of correctness, a guarantee that our thought and speech will stay "on the rails.” The concept, then, is thought to embody necessity, the necessity that determines why it must be employed this way and no other. Ilyenkov denies, however, that abstract universals could be capable of embodying such necessity. Inspired by Spinoza, he argues that abstract universals are backward looking. Since their content is determined by empirical generalization from past experience, nothing in that content can guarantee what will constitute corrections in future (cf. Spinoza 1677, p. 235). (p. 149)

In an article written four years earlier, David Bakhurst (1986) questioned the use of word meaning as a concrete universal, and his argument is worth mentioning, since it simply puts into question the entire operation in a logical fashion.

It may be objected that Vygotsky's celebrated recommendation is more than quasi-scientific speculation. He [Vygotsky] offers "unit of analysis” as a universal method. But why should we believe that such a procedure would work in all cases? (We have not yet seen it work in one). And how is the scientist to decide what he is to count as the unit? (p.110)

As mentioned before, it appears that the understanding of word meaning is often taken literally, without the Vygotskian aesthetic, as well as genetic-experimental background supporting it. Vygotsky stated that art is one future towards which humans might aim, even when it is beyond their reach. This idea embraces the unconscious as the cradle of creativity and imagination. The imbroglio word meaning finds itself enmeshed in regards the perspectives of observers, which appear to be objective, hence scientific or empirical. Inspired by Spinoza, Ilyenkov argued that abstract universals are backward looking, and it can be conjectured that Vygotsky's concrete universal or word meaning is a forward looking mechanism, aimed at one of the highest cultural explanatory principles possible. However, the problem is that its interpretation can be taken in any way possible. Interestingly enough, Bakhurst (1986) later states that "it is certainly wrong-headed to suggest that Vygotsky offers unit of analysis as a ready-made formula for the solution of all psychological problems" (pp.110 -111).

The point of establishing word meaning as a unit of analysis was to study the relationship(s) between thought [thinking] and language [speech] within a perspective conserving the whole unit.5 There is agreement with Wertsch (1985b), who asserts that "word meaning was intended by Vygotsky to serve a broader purpose" (p. 291); however, the literal translation of some of Vygotsky's concepts returns to the general problem of missing the point metaphorically. Word meaning as a unit of analysis , or indeed, any unit of analysis, will not be able to grasp consciousness in its full entirety which is humanly impossible. The plea at this point is to sit back and simply allow a different pattern of thinking to stand alongside a past history of behaviorist-empiricist trends. It is argued that in order to understand terms such as word meaning and consciousness, an understanding of German philosophy and psychology is a prerequisite in comprehending Vygotsky's position.

Attempts to change "Word Meaning" as a basic Unit of Analysis

There have been various proposals from the West and Russia to replace Vygotsky's word meaning as the central concept of unit of analysis, with V. Zinchenko offering his understanding of tool-mediated action.6 This idea is interesting since Vygotsky (in Bakhurst, 1991) "claims that the point of contact between thought and speech occurs when speech becomes a tool in problem-solving activity" (p.76). As well, Vygotsky studied the writings of A. A. Potebnya, who was read by many Russians from the 1850s onward, expressing thoughts quoted by Matejka (1980), such as "words are not only signs, definable in lexicographic terms, but tools which are capable of converting concrete images into abstract concepts" (p.146).

What actually takes place within Zinchenko's model is the proposal that word meaning be substituted with tool-mediated action , without going into detail as to the difference between tools and signs. Both tool mediation and semiotic mediation are subsumed under the general heading of tool-mediated, 7 thereby placing the concept of tool in the existing framework discussed within the area of Russian Activity Theory , which supposedly brings it closer to everyday life than Vygotsky did; and in fact, Zinchenko's suggestion is based on A. N. Leont'ev's ideas. It should be remembered that Russian activity theory was concerned with a better understanding of the human mind, more than with concept of consciousness. In trying to be specific, V. Zinchenko and his wife, N. D. Gordeeva (in Bakhurst, 1986)

offer eight requirements that any unit must satisfy (‘The unit must be a living part of the whole, the unit of life-activity must be capable of development, including self-development. etc.),8 but the criteria by which these requirements are selected remain a complete mystery. The reader is left to wonder whether he [she] is offered hard principles, presumably grounded in some kind of dialectical logic, or simply (very obscure) rules of thumb. (p.126)

The attempt of making Vygotsky's unit of analysis more practical in some ways undermines the philosophical nature of the entire Vygotskian framework. Vygotsky (in Kozulin, 1994) stated that "if word meanings change in their inner nature, then the relation of thought to word also changes. To understand the dynamics of that relation, we must supplement the genetic approach of our main study by functional analysis and examine the role of word meaning in the process of thought” (p. 217). A potential problem arises when it is implied that " . . . with the onset of language learning, the child's development can be explained solely in terms of learning word meanings. In this view the development of human consciousness could be reduced to the learning of semiotic codes” (Wertsch, 1985a, p.197). The danger arises in a possible static view of development, without including the realm of word meanings, which constantly change. Word meanings here are not the sole source of development for the child and consciousness cannot be reduced to semiotic codes. As Vygotsky (in Kozulin, 1994) stated,

word meaning is a phenomenon of thought only insofar as thought is embodied in speech, and of speech only insofar as speech is connected with thought and illuminated by it . . . It is hardly surprising that semantics did not even pose the larger question of the development of word meanings. Development was reduced to changes in the associative connections between single words and single objects . . . Linguistics did not realize that in the historical evolution of language the very structure of meaning and its psychological nature also change. (p.213)

In viewing word meaning as a unit of analysis , one is not bound to use Vygotsky's frame of reference; however, without it the discussion takes place on many levels where much confusion occurs. For example, in trying to place some of Vygotsky's linguistic contributions within a Western debate on areas of linguistics (i.e., propositional referentiality), some violations occur, unless there is a true cross-cultural attempt at understanding and comparing the issues. By leaving out a genetic-developmental component in discussions, or by leaving out the dialectic in the discussion itself, there appears to be an attempt to categorize Vygotsky. Caution has been given against such a conscious attempt at theorizing, which can easily miss the spirit of Vygotsky.

It is argued that Vygotskian scholars working within the parameters of philosophical consciousness and language theories should be consistent with Vygotsky's own framework. If scholars want to establish their own units of analysis, then they should also present an overall, coherent philosophical-psychological framework that fits that unit. It is paradoxical to attempt to change the very core of Vygotsky's intentions to then claim to be a Vygotskian. It is suggested that the attempt to replace Vygotsky's unit of analysis (for the purposes of understanding human consciousness via the psychological tools of language and thought) should be questioned and rejected. At the same time, there is a hope that by limiting the understanding of what Vygotskian research represents, at its core, there can be a broader understanding of the needed relationship between cultural-historical theory, activity theory, and sociocultural theory. In other words, the attempt to redefine Vygotskian research within Vygotsky's framework of Marxism, Spinozian philosophy, word meaning, philosophical consciousness, etc., is to overcome two problems: a) Vygotsky has often been accused of not dealing with the "real" person, and it is suggested that he completely and totally dealt with the real person. It is also claimed that many ideas within Vygotsky's writings are metatheoretical by nature, and that areas such as defectology, pedology, periodization, concept development, can be viewed at a higher, more generalized level. The ultimate paradox in Vygotsky's writings is that by generalizing his theoretical conclusions, the more concrete they can become; b) by redefining the Vygotskian research agenda as it was implemented by Vygotsky, there is a hope that a real bridge of understanding will be built between cultural-historical theory, activity theory, sociocultural theory, with a better understanding of differences of these approaches, concluding in a more meaningful bridge of understanding between these theories. There is no attempt to isolate Vygotskian theory from other related theories, but to specify the nature of the intentions Vygotsky was writing about and practicing. These intentions should not be violated.

With the above-mentioned arguments, the case has been presented to keep word meaning as the basic unit of analysis within the Vygotskian paradigm. If action is to replace word meaning as the basic unit of analysis, it will only contain the tools to reflect upon thought within phenotypic reflection. Therefore, it is argued that there are many units of analysis that are appropriate for discussion; however, the basic core of Vygotsky's psychology-philosophy should remain true to its origins.

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1 Although there are some differences of opinion with J. V. Wertsch in this article, it is because of his work and dedication to Russian psychology that many of us even know about Vygotsky. In my opinion, James Wertsch is the most important Western interpreter of Vygotskian thoughts on language.

2 Regarding consciousness, William James stated: "I believe that 'consciousness', when it has evaporated to this estate of pure diaphaneity [sic], is on the point of disappearing altogether. It is the name of a nonentity, and has no right to a place among first principles. Those who still cling to it are clinging to a mere echo, the faint rumour left behind by the disappearing ‘soul' upon the air of philosophy . . . For twenty years past I have mistrusted ‘consciousness' as an entity; for seven or eight years past I have suggested its non-existence to my students, and tried to give them its pragmatic

equivalent in realities of experience. It seems to me that the hour is ripe for it to be openly and universally discarded" (James in Vesey, 1964, p. 203).

3 "A 'unit' (edinica) , can also be referred to as a 'cell' (lketockaor jaceika) or a r c h (nacalo). It also bears an interesting relation to the idea of the 'concrete universal' (konkretnoe vseobšcee) as developed by Soviet philosopher such as IL'enkov who have attempted to develop Marx method in a way influenced by Vygotsky, see Dialektika abstraktnogo I konkretnogo v 'Kapitale' Marksa, (Moscow, 1960). (Translated as The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital (Moscow, Progress, 1982)" (Bakhurst, 1986, p.127).

4 Ilyenkov included a discussion on perception stating that " . . . perception is never a relation between a pure subject and raw experiential data, but between a socially formed subject and objects 'refracted' through the 'prism' of social consciousness " (Bakhurst, 1991, pp. 150-152). A.V. Zaporozhetz wrote an article on Vygotsky's understanding of perception, titled "L.S. Vygotsky's role in the study of problems of perception." In Soviet Psychology , 1966, Vol. V/1, pp. 19-41. This paper deals in part with establishing a new psychological system, where perception and thought are combined to form a whole.

5 See Ignatovic-Savic in Wertsch, 1985c, p. 291.

6 Wertsch, 1985a, p. 205.

7 See Wertsch, 1985a, p. 205.

8 "1. A unit must not be a diffuse, syncretic whole constructed of elements . . . Rather, it must be an integrated psychological structure . . . 2. The unit must maintain the characteristics of the unified whole, though internal contradictions and oppositions may exist . . . 3. These units, though preserving the structural characteristics of the whole, must be capable of development, including self-development . . . 4. The structural integrity of the analytic unit, its heterogeneity (i.e., the presence of contradictory origins), and its emerging properties, inevitably lead to yet one more characteristic of the unit on which Vygotsky insisted. The unit must be a living part of the whole . . . 5. For Vygotsky, a basic principle of research in psychology was that it must involve the study of the development, functioning, and structure . . . of specific units . . . 6. An analysis that divides a complex whole into units has the advantage of allowing one to combine its results with the synthetic of the properties of any complex

unity . . . 7. The units of analysis that are selected must not only reflect the internal unity of mental processes" (V.P. Zinchenko in Wertsch, 1985b, pp. 97-98).