Thinking and Speech: Introduction to Vygotsky's Theories of Language

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In the Western tradition, thinking is often understood as an intra-mental activity inside an individual mind, with speech representing vocalized thinking. In Vygotskian psychology, thinking and speech are viewed as a unit that contributes to the developmental process of the emerging personality of an individual, always tied together with the social. It is precisely the inter-functional relationship between the two that plays a very important role in guiding the individual to his/her highest potential. Thought has a pre-verbal root and speech has a pre-intellectual root, with both aspects intertwining and developing between “engagements” and “separations.” It is through the inter-functional systemic unity that thought can become verbal, with speech becoming intellectual (Kozulin, 1994, p. xxxii). This understanding is placed within a higher principle of consciousness, with Vygotsky claiming that thought and speech are the key to the nature of human consciousness. Paraphrasing Marx, A. A. Leontiev (2006) states that “consciousness is a virtual correlate of real language; it becomes real in language, takes on its being in language, its ‘body’” (p. 44). Instead of viewing humans as being isolated monads (in Leibniz’s understanding), Vygotsky understood each human as a social being first, to then become an individual personality through self-mastery, self-regulation. This internal freedom is connected to ideas of Spinoza, instead of the Western understanding of personal freedom of movement, or freedom of speech. There is a unity in Russian psycholinguistics, which includes higher levels of Spinozian monism, while using the dialectic (including tool and sign mediation, inter alia) as a means of achieving an image of the future, which ultimately has personal inner freedom as a goal, connected with the good of society.

In Western linguistics, polarized debates often occur in various areas such as behaviorism or innatism, for example. Clearly, within the Vygotskian method there is no complete separation of these varying principles, with a spectrum that includes both the lower [natural-biological-innate] psychological/mental functions, and the higher [cultural-transformative] psychological/mental functions. Higher functions have different laws of development than lower functions, and their growth is not paralleled with the development of the brain, nor do they develop side by side. Within these lower/higher functional fields there is a unity, but not an identity. The higher mental functions “usually are not constructed together with the elementary functions as new members in the same series nor above them as an upper story of
the brain above the lower; they are constructed according to the pattern of development of new complex combinations of elementary functions through the development of complex synthesis” (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 84).

Now, the understanding of development within the natural sciences normally follows the line of a natural development (metaphorically compared with a thermometer); whereas, development within Vygotskian cultural-historical theory is based on mediation, which offers indirect, mediated changes (metaphorically compared with a thermostat). And, within experiments, the test subject and experimenter form a unit, where the object being studied “must be represented in its natural state not only during the research but also outside of the research” (A. Puzyrei, 2007, p. 69). The cultural-historical approach can only be understood within a synthesis of dynamic unity, with a focus on process as opposed to product, all of which incorporates a genetic (=origins)-developmental and teleological (=goal-oriented) focus, viewing the potential growth of each individual, together with societal, cultural growth. Vygotsky (1994, pp. 167-168) stated that mental development does not coincide with the development of separate psychological functions, but rather depends on the changing relations between them...consciousness evolving as a real whole changes its inner structure with each step forward. The fate of each functional ingredient of consciousness thus depends upon the development of the entire system. At this stage, it is argued that functional organs (e.g., virtual organs such as particular skills, speech, concept formation, collective memory, intentions, etc.) are just as real as morphological organs (e.g., hands, feet, etc.). Functional organs play a primary role in the development of the higher psychological/mental processes, representing the opposite pole of innatism. A. A. Ukhtomsky (1978, p. 95) described functional organs as “any temporary combination of forces that are capable of achieving a specific outcome.” Also, Kozulin (1984) claims that for Vygotsky, the individual is a functional organ of society “in the sense of revealing the general consciousness of society in a particular form” (p. 117). Since the explanatory principle Vygotsky used was consciousness, he then took word meaning as one of the basic objects of study of consciousness. He selected word meaning because it could be used as a unit, as opposed to an element, giving the example of the problem of a chemical analysis of water, by simply studying the elements of hydrogen and oxygen separately, both of which do not contain the properties of the whole, e.g., water. In viewing thinking and speech as separate entities, the same problem occurs, and when trying to recreate a whole unity from analyzing and restructuring the parts only, one falls into the trap of reductionism. In the Vygotskian approach, the focus is on a process, while discovering different moments within the process. Both individual development and deeper communication require meaning, and Vygotsky (1997, p. 133) stated that meaning is the path from the thought to word. Meaning is not the sum of all the psychological operations which stand behind the word. Meaning is something more specific—it is the internal structure of the sign operation. It is what is lying between thought and word. Meaning is not equal to the word, not equal to the thought. If word meaning is indeed a microcosm of consciousness, then word meaning cannot be understood to completely reflect higher mental functions as representing separate entities of individuals because consciousness for Vygotsky is primarily social; and, on the individual level, word meaning incorporates sense (personal understanding at a point in time; a particular) and meaning (a stable understanding,
such as an entry in a dictionary; a universal), all of which represent a dynamic unity (within a process), constantly being modified and transformed. Meaning and sense arise in the development of thought giving birth to the word. Meaning is inherent in the sign, and sense enters into meaning, and is the result of meaning. The development of meaning is the development of generalization. At the same time, sense is viewed at a higher level than meaning, which only represents one level of meaning. Vygotsky stated that the structures of meaning/sense are determined by the systemic structure of consciousness.

A single word, for example, never stands alone, and it is a generalization in itself. Word meaning represents a whole unit, where thought and speech unite in verbal thought.

Individual consciousness emerges as a result of an interaction of sign mediation, language/speech, inner speech, meaning/sense, concept formation, activity, use of tools, contact with people and the environment, etc., all leading to higher, asymmetrical, non-linear mental processes. Language/speech, then, is no longer viewed in the Saussurian understanding of a system of signs hardly affecting change within society, or the individual. Speech is now connected with other functions such as perception, memory, imagination, volition, etc., and it is ultimately understood for self-regulation. Vygotsky (1999, p. 64) stated that man’s action arising in the process of cultural-historical development of behavior is free action, that is, action not dependent on a directly acting need [direct need] or a directly perceived situation, an action directed toward the future. The development of freedom of action is functionally dependent on the use of signs, and as Vološinov (1973, p. 15) stated, no cultural sign, once taken in and given meaning, remains in isolation...there is no outer sign without an inner sign. (p. 39). A sign is not a thing, but a process, an interweaving of relations in which social relations are always included even when we are dealing with natural signs, as it is only in a social context that something can exist as a sign. (cf. A. Ponzio, 1990). A real sign can only be understood as a part of a specific sign operation/sign activity where signs are always polyfunctional; and, signs are only achieved through action (cf. Pribram, 1971).

Vygotsky understood that practical intellect is genetically older than verbal thought, where action precedes the word, and even mental action precedes the mental word. At this point, the development of higher psychological/mental functions represents a change in inter-functional relations and connections, forming new mental, intra-functional systems. These systems have different origins/roots and operate within a synthesis of unity (but not identity). Very small children first master object-regulation, to soon learn to comprehend the interrelations between objects and gesturing with adults. This development then progresses to other-regulation, where children learn to use emotions arising from their need to direct adult attention to themselves. The process continues until there is self-regulation, with the social environment being transferred to the internal plane (which is never totally separated from the social plane). A key aspect of this theory is that of mediation by other people, tools, artifacts, signs, speech, etc. The internalization process incorporates both the material and ideal representation of tools (primarily used to direct social activity) and the semiotic and material representation of signs (primarily directed at inner mastery, inter alia), where new generalizations arise,
all of which require some trigger mechanism to cause the spark that creates an inner transformation. The initial part of the process of transformation is sometimes called displacement (used by L.S. Vygotsky and A. R. Luria, not to be confused with Freud’s same term), dereflection (V. Frankl), deautomatization (V. Sklovskij), disobjectivation (A. N. Leontiev), resulting in a converted form (M. Mamardashvili). There are three basic types of internalization: structural-type, stitch-type, and whole-type internalization (E. Berg, 1970, p. 103), with these terms serving as a meta-theoretical bridge (dialectically moving from the social to the internal to the social, within a never-ending circuit), which can lead to the moment of catharsis (from Vygotsky’s art theory), potentially triggering a process leading to self-regulation. Now, a child cannot progress to generalized, abstract communication (internally/externally) without the help of others, who are more advanced, and without the development of concept formation (understood as a process), which must transcend associationism. The growth and maturity of concept formation (which in reality is non-ending) serves as an important anchor for internalization. Here Vygotsky (1978, p. 57) offers his definition of a core aspect of his methodology and understanding of internalization, which was initially studied by Pierre Janet: Each function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological).

Vygotsky’s overall methodology combines the advantages of analysis and synthesis, permitting a study of complex wholes. The higher psychological/mental functions are developed within the process of a child’s social development, transferring forms of cooperation, crisis, adaptation, etc., which are absorbed/internalized in the process of interaction with the surrounding social environment. A. R. Luria worked with twin boys, Liosha and Yura, who had not developed linguistically or mentally. By changing the overall learning environment of these boys, they both began to separate their actions from their speech, hence, internalization (which always remains connected to the external), where meaning was then relocated and transformed within a new understanding of self-regulated action. Luria always viewed the entire environment and personality of these boys equally. The key to the improvement of each boy resulted from the acquisition of a language (speech) system. “In the last analysis this meant that the children were now in a position to ‘detach themselves from the immediate situation, to subordinate their activity to a verbally formulated project’ and so ‘to stand in a new relation to this situation’” (Luria & Yudovich, 1972, p. 87). Therefore, the process of internalization is viewed as being connected with externalization, where a transformation can take place (via, disobjectivation, inter alia), reaching the point of a shift, catharsis, with a new level of rooting/ingrowth. The basic understanding of transformation means that functional organs are created, which can orient a person to an image and realization of a future goal.

It is at this point that inner speech becomes a vital component within the overall methodology of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical approach to language/speech, which is viewed both as a psychological tool helping to form higher mental functions, while serving as one of these functions, which must undergo cultural development itself. One pole of inner speech is understood as a speech action moved inside,
produced in a compact form, while the second pole is accompanied by inner articulation in cases where inner speech is closest to conversational, discursive speech. A. R. Luria, for example, understood inner speech as having a vital role in recoding subjective elements into a syntagmatic scheme (cf. Vocate, 1987), which is viewed as being simultaneous, variant, where a form of synthesis can be created. Vygotsky’s focus on inner speech includes both meaning and sense, where meaning can be understood as denotation (or being culturally engendered), code, and is often literal; and, sense can be understood as connotation, with sign/symbolic functions, traditionally (but not always) viewed within the subjective field of “becoming,” which normally includes emotions.

Inner speech, which is preeminently the word, is actually an inner sign (cf. Vološinov, 1973). Consequently, it is not the word which is the expression of an inner self, but the inner self which becomes a word expressed or driven inward. Vološinov (1973, p. 38) tells us that units of inner speech are total impressions of utterances, and do not function according to the laws of grammar or logic, but to the laws of evaluative (emotive) correspondence, dialogical deployment, etc.

In closing, Vygotsky understood that higher psychological/mental processes also originate from the subconscious, and he felt 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 (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 85).

A point of origin of language/speech for Vygotsky was also derived from the study of handicapped children (defectology). He was able to demonstrate how handicapped children form concepts differently from other children, and he used this knowledge in developing general, overall theories of language/speech. Vygotsky stated that every handicap is a social construct, which can be compensated with “extracerbral connections,” where other people can compensate for the defective organ by “closing the circuit.” In following Vygotsky’s principles years later, blind and deaf children in Zagorsk (former Soviet Union) were constantly immersed in activities and communication for oneself and others. One of these children grew up to finish a degree in psychology at Moscow State University, to also become a mother and poet. A key feature of Vygotsky’s thinking on language/speech was to establish a methodological (e.g., here meta-psychological, meta-theoretical) approach in analyzing various crisis points within psychology. The crises described were understood as the optimal points where development could take place within a shift caused by the process of catharsis (via disobjectivation, and other concepts). Vygotsky’s psychology is called “height” psychology, focusing on the potential development of each individual via self-regulation, self-mastery, which regulates the highest potential of an individual personality.
In his works, Vygotsky used the highest logic he could establish to first honor the principles of many psychologists, to then point out their weaknesses and contradictions, offering his answers of synthesis/unity within a “new, general (objective/scientific) psychology,” which deals with process, cultural-historical growth (knowing that regression is also a part of growth), and which translates into a new concrete, human psychology. Vygotsky’s overall position is one of a unified wholeness, compared with a “unified cell” in the Marxist tradition, or a “monad” (+ attributes) in the Spinozian tradition; and, his methodology can be applied and extended to both children (more concretely), and to adult development (metatheoretically). He viewed language/speech as a basic key to the growth of human consciousness, and even regarding child development, his methodology is not intended to be a “lockstep,” concrete, prescriptive approach, but rather a more complex, intuitive, meta-theoretical approach to comprehending one of the mysteries of human life, the role of language/speech in understanding human consciousness.

Consciousness is reflected in the word like the sun is reflected in a droplet of water. The word is a microcosm of consciousness, related to consciousness like a living cell is related to an organism, like an atom is related to the cosmos. The meaningful word is a microcosm of human consciousness. (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 285)

References


