
EDITORIAL

The Perils of Translation: A First Step in Reconsidering Vygotsky's Theory of Development in Relation to Formal Education

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In this brief note I want to address the problem of translating into English the Russian word, *obuchenie*, as it concerns ongoing discussions of Vygotsky's ideas about the arrangement of children's experience by adults for the purposes of education and the relationship between learning and development that such arrangements engender. My current concern with this topic is part of an ongoing international re-examination of the ideas of L. S. Vygotsky in light of relatively recent, extensive translations of a large proportion of his works. These retranslations and this re-examination, particularly Chaiklin (2003), have for some years now enlivened the ongoing discussion held amongst members of the far-flung, international discussion that accompanies publication of *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, so it seems most appropriate to publish this note here.¹

My present comments are occasioned by the efforts of Andy Blunden, David Kellogg, and myself to work through the implications of such a reconsideration for Vygotsky's general theory of development.² This discussion, although productive, has not yet led to agreement sufficient to warrant publication of a full-fledged article, but the importance of getting people to rethink the issues of learning and development in light of the translation of the key term, *obuchenie*, seems too important to await the fate of our more extensive effort to re-evaluate and rearticulate a number of related key concepts and their interrelationships, including the relation of "wholes and parts," which bespeaks the importance of German gestalt psychology's influences on Vygotsky's thinking,

¹The discussion is available for inspection at <http://lchc.ucsd.edu/XMCA>.

²I am greatly indebted to these two colleagues who have given generously of their time in seeking to help me to understand the broad and deep roots of Vygotsky's theories.

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as well as a dense web of terms including “social situation of development,” “neoformation,” and “central line of development” that play a central role in his discussion of the dynamics of development (all of which are extensively discussed by Chaiklin, 2003).

The particular translation upon which I wish to focus was originally published posthumously in Russian in 1935 in an essay, the full title of which was “Learning/Teaching (*obuchenie*) and Development in the School Age Child.” It appeared under the title “Interaction between Learning and Development,” making up chapter 6 of *Mind in Society*. I was one of the editors of that volume, and although I did not translate the article, I was the only editor who read Russian and bear obvious responsibility for misunderstandings generated by the translation in the published text.

The issue of central concern is that the unwary reader is likely to draw incorrect inferences about the relationship between “learning” and “development” that occur in a school context, assuming that these terms meant to Vygotsky more or less what they mean to English-speaking readers today. As I demonstrate next, this assumption is wrong and the implications of translating the term *obuchenie* as learning, instruction, or another set of related terms, differentially encourage rethinking other of Vygotsky’s texts for their theoretical implications.

First of all, there is more than a little ambiguity about the meaning(s) of the term *obuchenie*, translated as “learning” in the chapter on “Interaction between Learning and Development” but translated as “instruction” in the corresponding portions of *Thinking and Speech* and in other textual contexts. In general, the Russian word, *obuchenie*, refers to a double-sided process, one side of which does indeed refer to learning (a change in the psychological processes and knowledge of the child), but the other of which refers to the organization of the environment by the adult, who, it is assumed in the article under discussion, is a teacher in a formal school with power over the organization of the children’s experience. So in that context, for those purposes, *obuchenie* is most adequately translated as “instruction” or “teaching.” The difficulties that arise when this circumstance is overlooked are highlighted in remarks made by Andrew Sutton (1980) not long after publication of *Mind and Society*,

It should be noted, too, that the Russian word, *obuchenie*, does not admit to a direct English translation. It means both teaching and learning, both sides of a two-way process, and is therefore well suited to a dialectical view of a phenomenon made up of mutually interpenetrating opposites. Its frequent conventional translation simply as ‘learning’ therefore renders much Russian work in English translation wholly meaningless, particularly the intense Russian interest in the relationship of *obuchenie* and development. It should be recalled that the verb “to develop” is transitive as well as intransitive, and that the dialectical viewpoint will therefore include a different view of the concept of “development.” Not only do children develop but also we adults develop them. On balance, Soviet developmental psychology is a psychology of teaching and teaching difficulties as much as ours is one of learning and learning difficulties. (pp. 169–170)

Note that this excerpt from Sutton’s text was published in the newsletter that preceded publication of *Mind, Culture and Activity*, and that in many subsequent publications, my colleagues and I have used the somewhat awkward (in English) phrase “teaching/learning” when talking about classroom interactions (e.g., Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989). But our usage has not been taken up generally, nor, if it were, would it necessarily evoke the meaning of deliberate instruction implied by the use of *obuchenie* that can plausibly be claimed to dominate Vygotsky’s text and many contemporary uses of the term in Russian discussions of education. So, one point to be made is that even when accepting and disseminating Sutton’s critique, the implications of the one-sided

definition of the term that occurred in *Mind and Society* and other texts did not penetrate the consciousness of the general English-speaking readership of Vygotsky's work (and the publication is now of sufficient age so that it has proven impossible to have a note inserted by the publishers in the publication still in print).

A second interesting point is that the appropriate concepts to describe different forms of the adult organization of environments for children in Russian as well as English contain their own ambiguities. In the recent *Large Psychology Dictionary* (Meshcheryakov & Zinchenko, 2003), *obuchenie* is defined as "education" and an attempt is made to offer a more general term, *uchenie*, that includes both the individual and sociocultural sides of the two-sided process or organized adult–children interaction. The (unidentified) author of the entry writes that

Uchenie is a necessary component of any activity . . . whether in animals or human beings. Increased complexity in the course of the evolution of the activity of animals leads to the appearance of more complex forms of *uchenie*. . . . In instructional activity, *uchenie* appears as the process by which individuals appropriate the historically formed modes of (human) activity. (p. 566)

But this has now become a more restricted term than *uchenie*, creeping in the direction of *obuchenie*.

A third interesting issue is that Russian translators also tend to stress "teaching" over "learning" when translating from Western European languages. The first translation one arrives at via a standard dictionary is "vyuchit," but "vyuchit" is given two definitions, first in terms of words such as "remembering" or "mastering" (which are clearly implicated in "learning" as that word is used in English) but also using terms such as "*obuchit*" (that is the verb form of "*obuchenie*"!) and "*nauchit*" or "formal instruction" which Boris Meshcheryakov (personal communication, July 15, 2008), one of the compilers of the recent *Large Dictionary of Russian Psychology*, suggests is the dominant translation.

But *obuchenie* was also a frequent rendering of the English word, learning, by Vygotsky's colleagues. For example, in a translation provided by A.R. Luria of the essay titled "Tool and Symbol in Child Development" (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994), Vygotsky and Luria refer to changes in children's behavior in practical activity involving tool use as arising from *teaching*, provoking the editors to comment: "[Russian *obuchenie* – better translated as complex of teaching/learning- eds.]" (pp. 113–114). When the Russians who translated the Vygotsky and Luria essay report on the work of two German psychologists, they substituted the word "teaching" for the German word conventionally translated as "learning" (See van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994, p. 103, footnote 11). Broader, general-theoretical differences between two national traditions of scholarship are clearly at work here.

Even granting that in some circumstances "*obuchenie*" may be reasonably translated as "learning" none of the potentially corresponding definitions of "*obuchenie*" or any of its near relatives in Russian fits comfortably with the term "learning" as that term is ordinarily defined in American psychology ("A relatively permanent change in behavior brought about by experience of events in the environment"). This mismatch can, for example, lead to the false impression that claims are being made that there can be no learning outside of the context of formal instruction (e.g., Lave, 1996).

Vygotsky explicitly contrasts his use of the term *obuchenie* translated as "learning" with the ideas of William James and E.L. Thorndike, whose theories represented the original framework of that part of American behaviorism referred to as "learning theory." According to this view, learning is a process of habit formation that results from "trial and error" during which associations

form between stimuli and responses. Such associations or “habits” become relatively stronger or weaker when certain responses come to dominate others because they lead to rewards. As Vygotsky (1978) put it, Thorndike proposed that

Learning is the acquisition of many specialized abilities for thinking about a variety of things . . . which does not alter our overall ability to focus attention but rather develops various abilities to focus attention on a variety of things. According to this view, special training affects overall development only when its elements, material, and processes are similar across specific domains. (p. 83)

From this perspective, as Vygotsky points out, learning and development are co-terminous. More learning equals more development. By contrast, for Piaget, development is a process of qualitative change arising from the interplay of existing schemas and environmental input so that learning and development are two quite different processes. As is well known, Vygotsky rejects both the Thorndike position of learning = development and the Piagetian position of two entirely separate processes in which development invariably sets the conditions for learning. Vygotsky’s goal was a process of *instruction*, a “teaching/learning” process that could induce development, which he defined in the following terms:

Our concept of development implies rejection of the frequently held view that cognitive development results from the gradual accumulation of separate changes. We believe that child development is a complex process characterized by periodicity, unevenness in the development of different functions, metamorphosis or qualitative transformation of one form into another, intertwining of external and internal factors, and adaptive processes that overcome impediments that the child encounters. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 73)

What remains unexplicated in this explicit definition of development is the nature of the complex relationships between instruction, learning, and development that take place in the context of formal education, and particularly the conditions in which instruction could be said to promote development, not just learning but broad transformations in knowledge acquisition, motivating his discussion of the zone of proximal development.

The widespread failure to recognize that in “Interaction between *Obuchenie* and Development” Vygotsky is writing about the developmental influences of *deliberately organized instruction in school* and that development refers to a transition between qualitatively distinct, if complexly organized, modes of being is at least one of the causes for the varying interpretations of his widely cited notion of the zone of proximal development, as Chaiklin (2003) pointed out.

It is beyond the purposes of this editorial to explicate a “one right way” to understand the relation between learning and development, their relationship to formal school instruction, our ideas about learning and development in informal enculturative activities, and other similar issues, within a Vygotskian paradigm.

But a few points should be clear. The first is that Vygotsky is referring in this article to a particular way of organizing children’s experience that will address more adequately the problem of “transfer” that vexes educational psychology to this day. He was seeking, as he remarks in several places, a form of instruction (*obuchenie*) such that one step in instruction can lead to two or even many “steps in development.” This kind of aspiration is best understood if one assumes that it is possible to create a form of instruction (and here we see clearly the influence of Gestalt psychology) so that having learned a particular fact (e.g., $2 + 3 = 5$) one is led to acquire, simultaneously, greater insight into the basic arithmetic operations as whole. It is precisely on these

grounds that Davydov argued for a “germ cell” approach to instruction that selected as “developmentally primary examples” instructional materials that would induce general understanding of laws within the domain under consideration and block misinterpretation. This goal is far from being generally realized, but it has shown great promise in the work of scholars such as Davydov, Tsukerman, and Schmittau, whose efforts need to be understood in this light.

It also provides a more adequate, but still incompletely articulated, way of thinking about the dynamics of development involving such ideas as the social situation of development and neoformations, as well as the differences between formal instructional settings and the many other forms of activity organized for and by children, where *obuchenie*, *vyuchenie*, *nauchenie*, and other related terms may all be present to various, heretofore unanalyzed, degrees.

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