# ARTICLES

# Vygotsky, Consciousness, and the German Psycholinguistic Tradition

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This article argues that Vygotsky's choice of word meaning as the basic unit of analysis for cultural psychology connects him to a German psycholinguistic tradition—exemplified in the work of G. W. F. Hegel and J. G. Herder—distinct from the Marxist tradition. While later commentators criticize Vygotsky's reliance on word meaning, arguing that it cannot explain the formation of consciousness, this German psycholinguistic tradition provides intellectual resources for rethinking the relationship between language and consciousness. Consciousness, through this model, arises from linguistic interactions, and is therefore not separable from language. Thus, word meaning encapsulates consciousness itself, not just its mediation in the world.

## INTRODUCTION

My purpose in this article is to address a criticism of L. S. Vygotsky first articulated by James Wertsch (1985b) in *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind*. Among his critiques of Vygotsky, Wertsch argues that word meaning—which Vygotsky (1986) identified as the basic unit of his analysis in the final chapter of *Thought and Language*—cannot serve as the basic unit of analysis for cultural psychologists; he argues that language only mediates the relationship between the mind of a speaker and the world, and therefore can only explain the mediation of consciousness, rather than consciousness itself. Wertsch's argument is that either activity or, in a 1991 article, mediated action, rather than word meaning, offers a unit of analysis that lives up to the demands Vygotsky articulated for a unit of analysis in *Thought and Language*. Wertsch's preference for activity over word meaning as a unit of analysis stems from a separation he draws between the

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mediation of consciousness and consciousness proper. I argue in this article that there is substantial reason to question Wertsch here, both in terms of his specific criticisms of this particular moment in Vygotsky's thought and in terms of the distinction he invokes between consciousness and mediation of consciousness.

Determining a basic unit of analysis is vitally important for cultural psychologists and cultural-historical activity theorists. One of the primary tenets of cultural psychology is a rejection of the traditional disciplinary boundaries separating different ways of studying the mind. In contrast, cultural psychology embraces studies of the mind that cross those disciplinary boundaries that tend to impoverish our understanding of how minds operate. This introduces a serious problem for scholars invested in cultural psychology; this rejection and its entailed embrace of interdisciplinary study makes the selection of a unit of analysis all the more important in order to ensure that research is possible: "The need to specify a unit of analysis arose from the fact that there is no manageable way to investigate consciousness in general as Vygotsky defined it" (Wertsch, 1985b, p. 192). Indeed, "in an important sense, the entire history of the Vygotskian school, including the contemporary development of what is known as the 'theory of activity' (Leont'ev 1978; Minick 1985; Wertsch 1981, 1985) [author's cites], must be understood as an attempt to solve the conceptual problem" (Minick, 1996, pp. 30–31; Wertsch, 1985a) presented by choosing a unit of analysis. Thus, Wertsch's criticism of Vygotsky's use in *Thought and Language* of meaning as his unit of analysis is not a minor technical point but speaks instead to a central problem in cultural psychology generally.

My approach to this question of cultural psychology's unit of analysis differs from those of previous thinkers. I look to interpret Vygotsky's defense of word meaning, found in the final chapter of *Thought and Language*, as a unit of analysis in cultural psychology through an examination of his intellectual history. I argue that word meaning and its relationship with consciousness in Vygotsky's writing needs to be understood in terms of his intellectual debt to a school of German psycholinguistic thinkers, who argued that language served to constitute, rather than mediate, selfhood. Adopting a model of Vygotsky's intellectual history that emphasizes this German psychological tradition therefore suggests that Vygotsky's psychological model treated selfhood as epiphenomenal to participation in language. This puts language *qua* language, rather than activity or mediated action generally, at the center of the psychological model found in *Thought and Language*. For thinkers in the German psychological tradition, language is not simply a passive mediator between an active consciousness and the world but rather an activity through which a mind is created; language is constitutive, not simply mediative.

This interpretive context introduces a problem in Wertsch's criticism of Vygotsky's choice of word meaning rather than activity or mediated action as his basic unit of analysis. Wertsch argues that the most important problem with treating word meaning as the basic unit of analysis for cultural psychologists is that it only allows analysis of the mediation of consciousness, rather than consciousness itself. This criticism presumes an important distance between consciousness and its mediation through language. But the German psycholinguistic tradition challenges that presumption. In modeling a constitutive, rather than simply mediative, role for language, thinkers like G. W. F. Hegel and J. G. von Herder collapsed this distinction: Human consciousness is formed through linguistic interactions, and the language which constitutes consciousness is therefore always a part of it, unable to be separated.

A considerable number of recent scholars interested in Vygotsky's work have attempted to tackle the challenging problem of articulating Vygotsky's intellectual history. Unfortunately, the

bulk of this scholarship focuses on the question of Vygotsky's intellectual predecessors primarily from a historical viewpoint rather than articulating how different understandings of Vygotsky's intellectual history affect interpretations of his work. Rather than simply "offer a picture of the Soviet psychologist's indebtedness to Enlightenment linguistic thought" (Hardcastle, 2009, p. 181), it is important to explain how this enhanced sense of Vygotsky's history should help later scholars interpret or use Vygotsky's work. Thus, my hope is that this article can serve two purposes: First, responding to Wertsch's critique of word meaning as a unit of analysis for cultural psychology and putting language back in the fore of cultural psychological analyses, and second, demonstrating the stakes in the ongoing debate over Vygotsky's intellectual history.

This article proceeds in three main sections. In the first, I examine Wertsch's (1985b) critique of word meaning as a unit of analysis for cultural psychologists in order to specify his three primary concerns. In the second, I analyze the research on Vygotsky's intellectual history, concentrating on the role of earlier German psychologists interested in consciousness and language, especially Herder and Hegel. Although the relationship between Vygotsky and Hegel has been paid considerable attention—sensibly, given the complicated relationship between Marx and Hegel—relatively little attention has been paid to the relationship between Vygotsky and Herder. In the third section, I turn back to Wertsch, and argue that he misinterprets a few key terms in Vygotsky's model of consciousness, which, when reinterpreted through an interpretive lens emphasizing the role of earlier German psychologists, suggest that word meaning can fulfill the necessary obligations of a unit of analysis for cultural psychologists, insofar as word meaning allows researchers to understand consciousness directly rather than only mediated consciousness.

## THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN VYGOTSKY'S MODEL OF SELFHOOD

Wertsch's presentation of the history of that criticism is capped off by his own criticism of Vygotsky's reliance on meaning, rather than action, as a unit of analysis. Understanding Wertsch's criticisms of Vygotsky's choice of word meaning as the basic unit of his analysis of consciousness helps us understand some of the limits that Vygotsky's short life imposed on his theories. By understanding the ways in which meaning is constitutive, rather than solely mediative, we can see why understanding language is central for understanding development for cultural psychologists.

The need for a manageable unit of analysis stems from Vygotsky's definition of consciousness as "the subjective reflection of material reality by animate matter" (Wertsch, 1985b, p. 187). This reflection, derived in part from Lenin's technical usage of "reflection" which is neither passive nor necessarily self-oriented, unifies the various higher mental functions, "such as memory, attention, thinking, and perception [which are] the subcomponents" of intellect (p. 190). These higher mental functions are organized dynamically, rather than statically, and changes in the interrelationships of higher mental functions lead to qualitative changes in consciousness. To study these qualitative changes in a unified consciousness, Vygotsky's work sought a basic unit of analysis that would be manageable; without developing analytic categories of consciousness, research into consciousness would be unmanageable.

Vygotsky's studies of the development of consciousness look to word meaning as this basic unit of analysis. From this point of view analyzing units of a subject is preferable to analyzing elements of a subject, offering water as an example: A research program emphasizing elements would have difficulty explaining why water, composed a mixture of flammable hydrogen and

oxygen, would be useful in putting out fires. By analyzing the unit of water, however, researchers can begin to explain water's actual relationship to fire. This example helps to illustrate Vygotsky's belief that the primary feature a basic unit of analysis must have is that it must be a microcosm of the phenomenon to be studied. Therefore, this interpretation of Vygotsky claims that, for Vygotsky, "the meaningful word is a microcosm of human consciousness" (p. 196). Thus, the basic unit of Vygotsky's analysis of human consciousness was word meaning.

Why word meaning? Because meaning, in Wertsch's analysis of Vygotsky's ideas, was a part of both speech and thinking insofar as it contains all of the essential properties of speech as well as all the essential properties of thinking. This is discussed at length in chapter 7, "Thought and Word," of *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1986); briefly, meaning is the mental category in which thoughts both find themselves and are transmitted in both inner and outer speech. Word meaning appealed to Vygotsky as a basic unit of analysis because it would force an analyst to maintain awareness of the dynamic properties of consciousness.

There are three criticisms of word meaning as a basic unit of analysis of consciousness in Wertsch's work. The least serious, for Wertsch, is that Vygotsky never illuminates the natural forces that interact with social forces to produce human consciousness: "Very little was known about early development in the natural line. The discoveries by Piaget about sensorimotor intelligence were yet to be made" (p. 198). Of moderate seriousness was Vygotsky's failure to fully explain the relationship of word meaning to propositional and discourse referentiality. An extended account of Vygotsky's semiotic failures can be found here, showing necessary extensions if one shifts to using a sentence, rather than the meaning of a word, as a unit of analysis, and Wertsch criticizes Vygotsky for his failure to distinguish between extralinguistic and intralinguistic contexts. But I think that this is of only moderate seriousness overall, despite the amount of time he spends on updating Vygotsky's general semiotic theory, for two reasons. First, as Wertsch points out, many of these extensions are a result of advances made in semiotics after Vygotsky's death. Second, as seen in how Wertsch argues for "tool-mediated, goal-directed action" as the basic unit is of analysis of human consciousness, the real problem Wertsch sees with word meaning as the basic unit is that he does not understand it as a microcosm of human consciousness *en toto*, but rather just a microcosm of the "*semiotic mediation of human consciousness*" (p. 196). This means, in his view, that

> another one of my criticisms was that word meaning is not really a unit that reflects the interfunctional relationships that define consciousness. Of course this is the most serious criticism one can raise, since it means that the analytic unit chosen by Vygotsky cannot fulfill the very requirements he assigned to it. (1985b, p. 206)

Wertsch's answer to these criticisms initially is to look to Leont'ev's use of activity as the basic unit of any analysis of consciousness through a brief examination of Spinoza's rejection of Cartesian dualism, and subsequently to look to Bakhtin's model of dialogicity to argue for mediated action as the basic unit of analysis for cultural psychologists. Note Wertsch's use of Spinoza here, even though they outline Vygotsky's relationship to Spinoza in similar ways: "Vygotsky sought in Spinoza an alternative to Cartesian dualism, which, by splitting the human being into machinelike body and spiritual mind, established for centuries to come the conflict between materialistic, scientific psychology and idealistic, philosophical psychology" (Kozulin, 1986, p. xiv). This shift proposes a set of interrelated levels of analysis in his theory of activity: Activity, action, and operation, which correspond to motive, goal, and instrumental conditions, as conditioning

circumstances that determine movement within each level. Activity is defined by Leon'tiev as "the nonaditive, molar unit of life for the material, corporeal subject. In a narrower sense (that is, on the psychological level) it is the unit of life that is mediated by mental reflection" (Wertsch, 1985b, p. 203). Action corresponds roughly to Vygotsky's formulation of the proper level of analysis: It is an individual acting in a context defined by his or her sociocultural context:

> To say that an individual is engaged in a particular activity says nothing about the specific means-end relationships that are involved. It simply tells us that the individual is functioning in some sociocul-turally defined context. The best indication that the two levels of analysis must be distinguished in that an action can vary independently of an activity. (p. 203)

A variety of actions can take place within a given realm of activity. Operations are those concrete functions that move an agent closer to a goal through a set of means. They are linked to instrumental conditions because they are proscribed by the temporal-spatial conditions of the agent. My shift here to a vocabulary of agency is not accidental; activity-based theories of consciousness accentuate the agency of the consciousness. According to Wertsch, activity theory is therefore preferable to word meaning as a basic unit of analysis because it provides a "manageable microcosm," of consciousness, while incorporating a consciousness's use of all the higher mental functions (p. 207).

There is a shift in Wertsch's preferred basic unit of analysis from activity in 1985 to mediated action in 1991, although his basic criticism of Vygotsky remains: In Wertsch's (1991) view, Vygotsky's focus on word meaning "did little to spell out how specific historical, cultural, and institutional settings are tied to various forms of mediated action" (p. 46). To help with this perceived deficiency, Bakhtin's concepts of polyphonicity and multivoicedness are drawn on; analyzing the different voices speaking during an utterance allows cultural psychologists a way of understanding how a speaker has internalized external cultural meanings; these internalized cultural meanings appear as the other voices through which the speaker ventriloquates.

Both of Wertsch's alternative units of analysis stem from a single criticism of word meaning as a microcosm of human consciousness itself, rather than a microcosm of the semiotic mediation of consciousness, and presume an important distinction between consciousness and the language through which a mind thinks. Although our commonsense model of language holds these two concepts as distinct ones, there is a 19th-century German psycholinguistic tradition that characterizes individual consciousness as epiphenomenal to linguistic interactions. These German thinkers are ones whom cultural psychologists have substantial reason to think Vygotsky had some familiarity with, either directly or indirectly. Next I outline Vygotsky's intellectual debt to this tradition as a way of explaining why I think Wertsch's criticism of Vygotsky relies on a model of language Vygotsky explicitly rejected.

## THE INFLUENCE OF GERMAN THOUGHT ON VYGOTSKY'S THOUGHT

Deciphering Vygotsky's influences is particularly complicated by the Soviet system under which Vygotsky worked. Intellectuals worked under the threat that their work, and therefore they themselves, might be judged out of step with the Communist Party's teachings, sometimes even years after having written; the aftermath of Vygotsky's work in the Soviet Union is offered by Kozulin

(1986) as a textbook example of how the Communist Party's influence on Russian science served to retard progress and obscure connections.

Whatever the effects of Stalin on the historical record, there is a scholarly consensus that Vygotsky's clearest intellectual forerunners are Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. During the Bolshevik Revolution and triumph of the Red Army, there was an atmosphere of freedom and possibility that Marxism generated in intellectual circles, suffusing the work of Vygotsky and his classmates; any advance seemed, more than possible, almost probable, and solutions to some of mankind's most constant problems felt just barely out of reach (Cole, Levitin, & Luria, 2005). Without an autobiography, it can be difficult to see precisely how Marxism influenced Vygotsky's work, but it comes through, both in Vygotsky's own claims regarding his work and the work of later scholars who have excavated some of the missing linkages.

But there are important reasons to suspect that Vygotsky and his followers may have overstated Vygotsky's debt to Marx and Marxism. Starting in 1929,

> Soviet psychologists were expected to derive psychological categories directly from the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Such a turn of evens seriously undermined Vygotsky's research program, which relied upon such "bourgeois" theories and methods as psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, and the cross-cultural analysis of consciousness. All these trends were labeled anti-Marxist, and Vygotsky's work pronounced "eclectic" and "erroneous." (Kozulin, 1986, p. xliii)

Luria and Leont'ev, Vygotsky's collaborators, moved into different fields of work around this time, and Vygotsky's colleagues and students moved to Kharkov and founded the Kharkovite school of psychological analysis. This school sought to distance itself from Vygotsky's work through an insistence on the importance of the so-called actual relations with reality (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 5).

Related examples abound. Alexander Luria's autobiography, *The Making of Mind*, was heavily censored by Soviet authorities, and a 2005 reissue, entitled, *The Autobiography of Alexander Luria: A Dialogue with The Making of Mind*, deals extensively with the facts of Soviet repression. In fact, the epilogue was so artfully edited that Soviet censors approved it, despite a series of revelations embarrassing to the Party which only Soviet citizens could decode: "At the same time, the absence of just these materials made it impossible for English language readers, unfamiliar with Soviet reality, to understand the real circumstances of Luria's life and work" (Cole et al., 2005, p. xv). Under Stalin's guidance, these circumstances included professional delays, bureaucratic "mistakes," assault, arrest, torture, murder, and assignment to reeducation camps. Cole et al. lay nearly all the blame for this at Stalin's feet.

The life of Mikhail Bakhtin provides a clear example of the role Stalinist policies has had in making scholarship on Soviet-era Russian thinkers difficult. Bakhtin avoided the death sentence only because of the early date of his 1929 arrest (the reason for which is unknown, but thought to be related to his work reconciling Christianity with Marxism). As a result of these early troubles, it is now difficult for modern scholars to simply attribute works to him; there are at least three names, including "Bakhtin," under which he is suspected to have published postexile, and serious debate exists as to what was his work, what was not, and what was partially his work. This is just one example of the kind of difficulties faced by Soviet scholars and the difficulties modern scholars have as a result of the coping strategies necessarily adopted by writers under Stalin.

In large part because of this, the most recent interpretive work on Vygotsky has emphasized his breaks with the prevalent Marxism of his times. For example, in 1935, there was an argument

made by Leont'ev that Vygotsky's emphasis on word meaning and cultural influences on the individual neglected material reality and its cultural reflection, economic classes. In Leont'ev's view, this placed Vygotsky within both the French and German sociolinguistic traditions, exemplified by Humboldt and Humboldtian scholar Gustav Shpet; this interpretation argued that, like French and German psycholinguists, Vygotsky understood culture through language rather than control over the means of production, which put him at odds with Soviet Marxism. There is, moreover, reason to think of Gustav Shpet as a primary contributor to a young Vygotsky's approach to language, as Vygotsky had heard him lecture between 1913 and 1916; Wertsch (2007) acknowledged this link: "In developing his line of reasoning on this issue [internal mediation], Vygotsky was heavily indebted to one of his mentors, Gustav Gustavovich Shpet" (p. 184). This view of language influenced Vygotsky's understanding of language in two ways. First, both theorists attempted to combine "individual senses and social meanings into a single structure," which did not lose its objective nature by falling into pure subjectivism. Second, both theorists explicitly reject monocausal approaches in favor of dual-nature systems: In Shpet's case, these two causes were the natural and the spiritual, whereas for Vygotsky, these were the natural and the social. Vygotsky would have been unable to cite Shpet's influence because of his fear of Stalinist reprisals; citing Shpet risked seeming bourgeois and decadent, deviating too far from materialist orthodoxy. More recent work identifies not just Humboldt but Herder and Condillac as Enlightenment precursors to Vygotsky's project.

Interpretations of Vygotsky that mistakenly focus on his intellectual debt to Marxism misunderstand the relationship between language and consciousness in his writings because of a lack of focus, on the part of Vygotsky's interpreters, on the importance of 19th-century German thought in Vygotsky's philosophical rooting. Elements of this thought can be seen throughout Vygotsky's work, including his identification of Humboldt as the progenitor of "the first and most widespread formula of art psychology," (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 30) and his acknowledgment of the importance of both Humboldt and Wundt in developing his own thought toward art, especially on the relationship between subjectivity and understanding. However, in order to focus on a response to Wertsch's criticisms, I want to, like him, focus my attention on *Thought and Language*.

The writings of Herder, Humboldt, Shpet, and Condillac all attempt to reconcile the fact of subjective mental states with an objective world (and an ability to pursue objective analyses of mind) through language, just as Vygotsky did. This overlapping understanding of language's role in connecting the external world with the internal one also provides an alternative to Werstch's way of thinking about the role language plays in constructing the self. Language, for these earlier thinkers, and, I argue, for Vygotsky, does not simply mediate between the world and the self but also serves to help construct the self itself; selfhood is epiphenomenal to social interaction through the medium of language, not prior to it. Because of language's constitutive role, word meaning can in fact serve as a microcosm of consciousness; word meaning does not just explain the mediation of consciousness—it also explains the genesis of consciousness. Interpreted this way, word meaning can, contra Wertsch, serve as unit of analysis.

The absence of focus on 19th-century German thought in determining Vygotsky's intellectual history is particularly curious because of the importance modern scholars have seen in a link between Vygotsky and the American pragmatist school, especially George Herbert Mead and the Chicago Pragmatists, who themselves drew on Hegelian thought. Of course, although these similarities are suggestive, they neither encapsulate all these complex thinkers' thoughts nor even, on their own, prove a common intellectual ancestor. This literature emphasizes Mead

but also addresses similarities between Vygotsky and Dewey. There is an interesting argument that Dewey and Vygotsky were connected through the early 20th-century "New Man" projects (Popkewitz, 1998), but this is the only suggestion of a political, rather than philosophical or scientific, connection between Vygotsky and any Western thinker. A small literature examines the ways in which Mead and Vygotsky are similar, usually concentrating on the thinkers' mutual rejection of Cartesian dualism. The specific ways in which this similarity cashes out varies from writer to writer, but some consensus seems to exist that the mutual rejection of Cartesian dualism led both Mead and Vygotsky to model the development of the human mind around the social relationships in which a mind is involved. A full explanation of the rich work of Mead goes well beyond the scope of this article; however, the essential points in Mead's argument are that the mind is epiphenomenal to social interactions, that interaction with the world is always at least partially mediated, and that language and conversation are important mediators. "Vygotsky and Mead on the Self, Meaning, and Internalisation" (Glock, 1986) is typical of this genre. It traces parallels between Mead and Vygotsky back to their shared understandings of three theoretical elements: A socially generated self, the process of internalization, and the beginnings of language meaning and use. Other authors have noted other similarities.

But scholars examining both Vygotsky's relationship to Marxism and the connections between Vygotsky and Mead and the Chicago pragmatists have largely neglected the role non-Marxist elements of German psychology and philosophy may have played in Vygotsky's thought. This is puzzling: As previously noted, the secondary literature on Vygotsky's influences includes numerous 19th-century German thinkers or thinkers influenced by them, among them Shpet, Mead, Dewey, Humboldt, and Wundt, especially on the concept of a *Völkerpsychologie*. Understanding Vygotsky's relationship to earlier German thinkers allows us to understand the special place language held for Vygotsky's model of analysis of the mind. I look first to the influence of Hegel's thought on Vygotsky before discussing Herder's influence.

Some writers have suggested that the connection, noted earlier, between Mead and Vygotsky is the result of a mutual appreciation of Hegel. The reason Mead and Vygotsky read so similarly is because both were influenced by Hegelian scholars around them; both Mead and Vygotsky are theorists for whom mental development, especially of a concept of a "self," occurs through social interaction. In Mead's story of development, the mother treats utterances the child makes as parts of a conversation, which gradually leads the child to adopt a conversational mode of interaction, which serves to reinforce the differences between the self of the child and the other of the mother (for the child). Thus, the model of the child as a prisoner in a cell, who develops abilities to free himself, is incorrect; this presumes an existing self that develops tools for expression, rather than understanding mental development as the ontogenesis of the self. Vygotsky's criticisms of Piaget lead him, in the same vein, to reject the model of a child as a prisoner in a cell (or solitary scientist, as other critics of Piaget have described Piaget's model) and to treat the self as epiphenomenal to social interaction and the use of signs and tools, of which language is the most important. These characterizations, though brief, strike me as accurate in the essence. Although a number of scholars who have connected Mead's work to Hegelianism see the connection as direct, and attribute Mead's model to Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Miller, 1982), the connection between Vygotsky and Hegel is significantly less well developed; this is surprising, given that Vygotsky is known to have been familiar with Hegelian ideas.

There are two primary elements of Hegelian thought which overlap with Vygotsky's. The first is the struggle between the subject and the other, and the resultant identities, which Hegel

explores in the first section of chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology*. The second is the importance of *activity* as a human category. Hegel's story of the development of, first, an authentic sense of self as the result of recognition by another who is demonstrably not oneself and, second, the ways in which the assignation of social categories of "master" and "servant" (or "lord" and "bondsman") fill out the substance of that sense of self do seem to argue for a model of the development of the mind that is inherently social; it seems fair to say that, for Hegel in the *Phenomenology*, the concept of the "self" occurs through social interaction. Additional support for this view can be found throughout the *Phenomenology*, including his rejection of objective universal knowledge in favor of a knowledge aware of its preconditions and assumptions. Unfortunately, this interpretation of Hegel comes purely from a secondary source that actively sought to purge Hegel and Hegelianism of significant metaphysical grounding, and to root Hegel's ideas instead in a combination of logic and historical claims, reducing the importance of Spirit, or *geist* in Hegel's argument (Veer, 1987). This interpretation of Hegel therefore puts him closer to Marxist thought than other interpretations.

Although this interpretation of Hegel is within the mainstream of the secondary literature on Hegel, it is neither recent nor uncontroversial. An interpretation of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* both more recent and less controversial supports at least Veer's first claim. In this interpretation, "a self-conscious agent is conscious of a world of sensuously perceived objects that exist independently of him, and he is aware of himself as a position in 'social space,' as *taking* things *as* such and such" (Pinkard, 1994, p. 47). Note that this supports Veer's claim that the Hegelian model of the self is inherently tied to the social, as well as the contention that Hegel rejects objective universal knowledge in favor of a reflexive knowledge aware of its social nature. The fact that the self-conscious subject (i.e., a subject conscious of the fact of having a self) is a position in social space makes the subject worry about his independence: He needs "his conception of himself mirrored back to him in the acts of recognition from another agent" (Solomon, 1983, p. 53). This position in social space is determined in large part by the relationship one has to both others and to the material world; a slave who is used to mediate his master's relationship to the material world has a different self, because of his relationship to both the material world and his master. Thus, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the self emerges through social interaction, which leads to the characterization of *geist* as a reconciliation of the individual and their culture. This mirrors Vygotsky's understanding of mental functions as essentially cultural: "Vygotsky used the Hegelian term 'superseded' (*aufgehoben*) to designate the transformation of natural functions into cultural ones [which corresponds to higher functions]" (Kozulin, 1986, p. xxv). The strength of the first connection between Mead and Vygotsky to Hegel is important to understand, because the second connection is, I think, weaker than Veer presents. Although the importance of activity as the unit of sociological analysis has been emphasized by later followers of Vygotsky (especially Michael Cole, James Wertsch, and Yrjö Engeström), Wertsch's criticism of Vygotsky centers around Vygotsky not having moved in this direction himself; activity has been a more central concept for later cultural psychologists than it ever was for Vygotsky.

Vygotsky's model of thought in "Thought and Word" at the end of *Thought and Language* breaks with Hegel and the German tradition over the political implications of their shared psychological model. Although an important connection between Vygotsky and Hegelian thought exists, Vygotsky's focus is on psychology, rather than politics. This separation comes through in two ways. First, we can see this in the ways the hierarchy of Hegel's master/bondsman model

of recognition fails to be mirrored by Vygotsky; for Vygotsky, recognition is not hierarchical. Our social nature comes from coequal participation in a linguistic community or activity rather than a hierarchical distribution of power. The second is his break from Hegel's claim that the state is the proper community in and from which the self constitutes itself. For Hegel, this is important because the self can be linked to only one community. Vygotsky implicitly rejects this argument in his distinction between word meaning and word sense. There are important links described between Vygotsky and Bakhtin; these are important to understand in working out Vygotsky's relationship to Hegel, as dialogicity in Bakhtin rejects explicitly what Vygotsky rejects implicitly in Hegel's state-centrism. This break that culminates in the distinction between meaning and sense is the culmination of Vygotsky's model of the mind and its relationship to other minds. Examining the influence of a Herderian conception of language on Vygotsky can enhance cultural psychologists' understanding of the implications of this rejection of a politically hierarchical construction of mind through human activity.

Some elements of Herder's thought are clearly reflected in Vygotsky's writings, especially in their mutual concern with language's role in constituting human selves. There is a rejection, shared by Herder and Vygotsky, of any presumption that children understand the signification role of language; in both models of linguistic acquisition, that development is precisely what a theory of language acquisition must itself explain, rather than explaining language acquisition itself. This claim is a response to Condillac; in *Thought and Language*, it is a response to Piaget. Reflection plays an important role in language, and therefore in consciousness, which is based in the ways reflection and language mutually construct one another; to be conscious is to be able to use language to mean things, which requires linguistic reflection on the language one uses. Our consciousness is reflected in our capacity to express ourselves in language, which causes us to inhabit the words we choose. But these similarities only go so far. Interpretations of Herder have taken him to be far more of an expressivist than Vygotsky, an interpretation that stems from Herder's naturalist vision of nationalism: "Language is the obvious basis for a theory of nationalism founded on the expressivist notion of the special character of each people, language conceived in Herderian fashion, that is, in terms of an 'expressive' theory" (Taylor, 1989, p. 415).

According to Herder, his conception of language is superior to previous, designative theories of language, represented in his mind by Condillac. This designative story of the origin of language is a collection of representations in *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* through a fable of two children meeting in the desert. One child feels pain, and cries out. The second child, recognizing the emotion as pain, comes to associate the sound of crying with that which causes pain. Over time, the cry becomes stylized and connected to the abstract concept of the causation of pain; this becomes the first word in the common lexicon of the children, and other words gradually crystallize from there. According to this conception of language, words mean things, and language is an agreed-upon mapping of the representations of things by words. The things represented can be abstract things, of course, but the essential linguistic relationship remains a simple designative one.

This conception of language is argued against by Herder, who contended that the designative, representational view of language avoids serious discussion of one of the central mysteries of language acquisition: Prelinguistic designation. There is an assumption made by Condillac that the second child will recognize the cry for pain and will know how to associate the sound of crying with the concept of pain. But that association is difficult to justify prelinguistically. If the second child understands the first child's cry as a designative one, then the two children already share a

proto-language; they may not have all of the nouns and verbs figured out, but the fundamental question of designation and representation—what does a sound have to do with meaning?—is stipulated by Condillac.

Language, Herder argued, is better understood by thinking about it as the result of reflexive awareness. Compare this understanding of language to a behaviorist experiment, in which a rat is trained to respond to seeing a triangle. On one hand, the rat must have some comprehension of a triangle, if it is trained to respond to the triangle and not other shapes, but this differential response is different from reflexive understanding, because the rat does not understand what the triangle means and therefore cannot use it. And, without being able to use a word, we (rats and humans alike) cannot be said to understand the word:

> Only beings who can describe things as triangles can be said to recognize them as triangles, at least in the strong sense. They do not just react to triangles, but recognize them as such. Beings who can do this are conscious of the things they experience in a fuller way. They are more reflectively aware, we might say. And this is Herder's point. To learn a word, to grasp that "triangle" stands for triangles, is to be capable of this reflective awareness. That is what needs to be explained. To account for language by saying that we learn that the word "a" stands for a's, the word "b" for b's, is to explain nothing. How do we learn what "standing for" involves, what it is to describe things, briefly, to acquire reflective awareness of the language user? (Taylor, 1985, p. 228)

Herder's model of language is not simply a list of representations, in which certain verbal constructs designate certain objects or activities or states, because the idea of designation and representation itself requires language. Instead, Herder's argument is that language is best understood as a functional system in which selves operate. Thinking selves must have some shared conception of meaning in order to communicate with one another (although they can develop idiosyncratic senses of words). Thought and language use are tightly linked—both Herder and Vygotsky define understanding in terms of word usage. Word meaning for Herder is therefore constitutive of consciousness, as Vygotsky later characterized it.

This constitutive function is what allows Vygotsky to treat word meaning—rather than activity—as the basic level of analysis. To the extent that cultural psychologists interpret *Mind in Society* and *Thought and Language* through Vygotsky's exposure to Herder, Vygotsky's privileging of meaning makes sense in light of Herder's argument that the central role of word meaning in characterizing reflective understanding is itself implicated in a conception of language as an activity.

## IS LANGUAGE THE CENTER OF SELFHOOD FOR VYGOTSKY?

Interpreting Vygotsky through a Herderian framework suggests that Wertsch's move to activity as a preferable unit of analysis than word meaning for cultural psychologists is unnecessary, as word meaning corresponds with the genesis of consciousness, not just its later mediation. Wertsch's primary criticism of Vygotsky's use of meaning seems to come from an unsympathetic interpretation of meaning's relationship to consciousness. Wertsch's interpretation of the role of meaning in Vygotsky's theories overemphasizes its mediative role and underemphasizes its constitutive role; Wertsch treats meaning as something that exists primarily as a bridge between an existing individual and the objective world, rather than something that constitutes the individual.

Take his explication of the contention that word meaning fails to fulfill the microcosmic function Vygotsky needs his basic unit to fulfill:

> 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. If one considers word meaning as defined by the sign-type-sign-type relationships of genuine concepts, one sees that Vygotsky's concern was categorization and systems of categorization inherent in the linguistic code. Such categorization serves an essential function as a means for *mediating* consciousness, but is is not consciousness itself. (Wertsch, 1985b, p. 196)

This formulation begs the question. To begin with, it is hard to see how memory and attention in particular can not be tied to word meaning: Meaning is accessed in large part through memory, and attention is centrally tied to concept formation, which for Vygotsky occurs through word meaning. "The development of concepts, or word meanings, presupposes the development of many intellectual functions: deliberate attention, logical memory" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 150). Thus, it seems as though word meaning does in fact reflect the interfunctional relationships between the higher mental functions. Although that reflection does not itself tell the researcher what the interrelationship is, a proper understanding of word meaning in Vygotsky requires an understanding both of what the higher mental functions are and that they interrelate; the particulars of the interrelationships change over time and across sociocultural contexts. This is reinforced by Vygotsky's explanation of the role of schooling in intellectualizing memory.

Beyond the particulars of the mental functions Wertsch points to, his criticism of Vygotsky seems to rest on his presumption of distance between mediative functions of mind and consciousness. But this characterization of word meaning in terms of "the sign-type-sign-type relationships of genuine concepts" (Wertsch, 1985b, p. 196) seems to attribute to Vygotsky a model of language more indebted to Condillac than to Herder; here, Wertsch characterizes language as a designative system, in which words are signs designating certain socially-conventional meanings. Although this is a common model of language, it is not at all obvious that Vygotsky thought of language in this way. Instead, if we interpret Vygotsky's claims in *Thought and Language* regarding word meaning as the basic unit of an analysis of consciousness alongside his intellectual debt to Herderian thought and other German psycholinguistics, through the prism outlined by Herder, we can defend Vygotsky's choice of word meaning insofar as Wertsch mischaracterizes the nature of language in Vygotsky; Vygotsky rejected a designative system of language in favor of an constitutive system of language. Language does not simply mediate between an existing mind and the objective world around it; instead, linguistic interaction serves to constitute the mind itself. Thought, as Vygotsky says, finds itself in language. The thoughts of a conscious mind find themselves in language—absent words rich with the meanings created intersubjectively through a shared practice of language, thoughts have no more solidity than shadows cast by the noonday sun.

Even when Vygotsky problematized word meaning, as in the last chapter of *Thought and Language*, in which he introduces a distinction between sense and meaning, thought itself is found in word meaning: "The unit of our analysis will thus contain in the most fundamental and elementary form those properties that belong to verbal thinking as a whole. We found this unit of verbal thought in word meaning" (Vygotsky, 1986, pp. 211–212). Bearing in mind Lenin's technical

definition of "reflect," in which reflection on the part of animate matter is active and implicated, rather than passive and removed, it seems perfectly reasonable to identify consciousness and thought. Vygotsky's choice of word meaning as his basic unit of analysis of human consciousness comes about not because meaning is a bridge between speaking and thinking, as Wertsch claims, but because meaning is the locus of thinking, which can reasonably be interpreted as consciousness as Vygotsky defines it, because thought, in Vygotsky's work, is subjective, reflective of material reality, and performed by animate matter.

Vygotsky's argument that word meaning plays an important role in guiding human development seems to rely on a model of human nature and language mirrored in both Herder and Hegel. The model of language articulated by Herder, in which language acts as a functional system precisely because of its mediative role, cannot alone explain language acquisition. A story of language acquisition that will satisfy Herder cannot be premised on a presumption of language mediation, because it is language's mediative role that presents a likely barrier to understanding between two speakers. This focus on language as a constitutive element of identity is likely, at least in Vygotsky's case, a specification of Hegel's argument for the role that socially functional systems play in human development. We should expect that word meaning would present a useful basic level of analysis for Vygotsky, because word meaning only ever exists within the type of social context in which identities are formed as well. Word meaning does mediate the world, but it does not just mediate the world (or, we might say, it does not passively mediate the world). It also serves to allow the social interactions that give rise to identities later indebted to word meanings. But this is challenging to see only through Vygotsky's relationship to Marxism. It is only by taking account of the influence of German thought on Vygotsky that we know how to understand the particular way meaning's mediation can construct identities, and therefore explain development.

## CONCLUSION

There is substantial reason to think that Vygotsky conceptualized the self as epiphenomenal to linguistically mediated social interactions, given the debt he seems to owe to a German psycholinguistic tradition that relied on a cognate model of the development of selfhood. To the extent that Vygotsky adopted this model of human mental development alongside his adoption of this conception of language as a system of activity, then the gap Wertsch identifies between the mind itself and the mind's semiotic mediation of consciousness becomes hard to discern; the mind cannot be disentangled from the semiotic mediation language provides because language does not just mediate the mind, but also helps produce the mind.

The idea that linguistic practices could serve to constitute consciousness is one deeply rooted in a particular German psycholinguistic context; interpreting Vygotsky through a primarily Marxist lens helps obscure this possibility by positing an individual consciousness prior to engagement in linguistic interactions. Understanding Vygotsky's intellectual context is not simply a question of historical accuracy. Rather, because of his challenging writing style and conceptual richness, different understandings of his intellectual context lead to different claims regarding basic questions of his theory, such as in this article, the fundamental relationship between mind and language.

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