Word and Act

For some psychologists, the old saying “in the beginning was the word” still retains its validity. New studies, however, leave no doubt that the word does not stand at the beginning of the development of the child’s mind. As Bühler correctly notes, on a similar basis, it was said that speech stands at the beginning of the creation of man. Perhaps. But prior to it, there is instrumental thinking. Practical intellect is genetically older than the verbal; action precedes the word, and even mental action precedes the mental word. But now, in confirming this correct idea, the act is usually overvalued to the detriment of the word. Usually it is thought that the relation of the word and the act (independence of the act from the word and primacy of action), which is characteristic for the earliest years, is maintained at all subsequent stages of development even over the whole course of life. This same Bühler, more careful than others, but expressing essentially the same opinion, believes that in man’s later life, technical and instrumental thinking is to a much lesser degree connected with speech and concepts than other forms of thinking.

This conviction is based on an erroneous assumption that the initial relations between separate functions remain unchanged over the whole course of development. Research also teaches the opposite. At each step, it teaches us to admit that all of the history of development of higher mental functions is nothing other than a change in initial interfunctional relations and connections and the appearance and development of new mental, functional systems.

This pertains, wholly and completely, specifically to the interfunctional relation of word and act, which interests us now.

Together with Gutzmann, we say: “If even following Goethe, we reject the higher evaluation of the word as a vocal word and together with him transform the biblical statement to ‘At the beginning was the act,’ it is possible nevertheless, to read those verses and understand them from the point of view of development with a different stress: ‘In the beginning was the act.’”

But Gutzmann makes another mistake. Objecting completely justifiably to the teaching on apraxia of H. Lipmann, who is inclined to consider the relation between action and speech and their disturbance in apraxia and aphasia as a relation of the general to the particular, he himself takes the position that word and action are completely independent. For Lipmann, aphasia is only a special case of apraxia, and speech as a special form of movement is only a specific case of action in general. Gutzmann justifiably objects to this conception that makes the word a
specific function in the general conception of action. He indicates that only movement as a more general concept can encompass expressive movements (speech) on the one hand and, on the other, action as coordinate, parallel, coordinated, inter-related, more special concepts. To consider speech as a more particular case of action means to depend on an incorrect definition of the concept of action.

The conception according to which speech and action are logically parallel and independent concepts and processes inevitably leads to the antigenetic point of view, to rejecting development, and to the metaphysical raising of this (and consequently to nonintersection of speech and action) to the rank of an eternal law of nature and to ignoring the changeability of functional systemic connections and relations. Gutzmann for an instant, as he himself indicates, takes the point of view of the history of development, but only in order to delimit what was earlier from what was later. In the old pronouncement in which only the beginning was mentioned, he changes nothing except the logical stress. He is interested in what was in the beginning and what developed later and, consequently, what belongs to the more primitive, elementary, lower forms of behavior and what must be ascribed to more developed, complex, and higher functions. He says that speech always implies a higher degree of human development than even the highest expression of action, the act.

But at the same time, Gutzmann, like most authors, takes the formal-logical position. He considers the relation of speech and action as a thing and not as a process; he takes it statically and not dynamically, not in movement; he considers it as eternal and unchangeable, while it is historical and assumes a different concrete expression at each stage of development. All of our studies lead us to the conviction that there cannot be a single formula that would encompass the whole range of variability of relations between speech and action at all stages of development and in all forms of disintegration. In truth, the dialectical character of development of functional systems cannot be adequately reflected in any one constructive formal-logical scheme of relations of concepts—neither in Lipmann's scheme nor in Gutzmann's scheme—since neither the one nor the other considers the movement of concepts and the processes that stand behind them, the changeability of relations, the dynamics and dialectics of development.

As Gutzmann formulates his idea, practically implemented action has nothing in common with speech even if this word were taken in the broadest sense. If the premise of Gutzmann is correct for the beginning of development and describes the primary stages in the development of action, then for later stages of this process, it becomes radically erroneous. It reflects one instant, but not the whole process as a whole. For this reason, theoretical and clinical conclusions that can be reached from this position are valid in a very limited sphere, specifically, in the sphere of initial stages of development of the relation that interests us; to present them as a description of the process as a whole is to fall inevitably into contradiction with factual data on the development and disintegration of higher forms of action.

We shall consider the contradiction between theory and facts. Gutzmann sees the basic difference between action and word to be that, following Wundt, he considers volitional action as an affect, as a clearly expressed unilateral, personal relation of the person acting to the external world; here communication of internal states, typical for speech and all expressive movements, is relegated to the background and has a peripheral significance. While the internal character of action is predominantly personal and egocentric even with altruistic goals, the nature of expressive movement is opposite to this. Even with an egocen-
tric content, it displays, let us say, its own kind of altruism: Gutzmann maintains that it is "thoucentric"* and has an inevitably social character.

But the most remarkable part of what happens with action and word in the process of development is left aside here: the development of egocentric speech and "thoucentric" action, a conversion of the social method of behavior into a function of individual adaptation, an internal transformation of action with the help of the word, the social nature of all higher mental functions, including practical action in its higher forms. It is not surprising therefore that volitional action becomes comparable to affect with the difference that it leads to external changes that eliminate affect itself. Mastery as an essential internal factor of volitional action is left outside the visual field of the investigator. This new relation of action to the personality, which arises due to the word and leads to mastery of action, this new relation of the actor to the external world that is manifested in free action, controlled and directed by the word—none of this arises at the beginning of the process of development and, for this reason, is not taken into account at all.

Moreover, we can trace along the whole chain of facts how the action of the child is socialized in the process of development and how with the loss of speech, in aphasia, practical action drops to the level of an elementary zoopsychological form.

Whoever pays no attention to this inevitably perceives the psychological nature of both speech and action in a false light since the source of their change lies in their functional merging. Whoever ignores this basic fact and tries to present speech and action as two parallels that never intersect in order to preserve the purity of a classification scheme necessarily limits the true amplitude of the one and the other since the amplitude of the content lies primarily in the connection between the one concept and the other.

H. Gutzmann limits speech to expressive functions, communication of internal states, and communicative activity. But the whole individual-psychological aspect and the whole transforming internal activity of the word simply remain apart. If this parallel and independent relation of word and act were to be preserved over the whole course of development, speech would be powerless to change anything in behavior. The action aspect of the word is mechanically excluded, and for this reason there inevitably develops an underestimation of volitional action, of action in its higher forms—action connected with the word.

As study of the connections between the word and the act during childhood and in aphasia shows, the whole essence of the matter is that speech raises action, formerly independent of speech, to a higher level. Both development and disintegration of higher forms of action confirm this. Despite Lipmann's conclusion, which considers aphasia as a special case of apraxia, Gutzmann claims that apractic disturbances must be placed in parallel to aphasia. It is not difficult to see here a direct continuation of his original idea of the independence of action and speech. But clinical data speak against such a view. Disturbances of higher forms of action connected with the word, disintegration of higher forms and the detachment of action and its functioning according to independent, primitive laws that occurs in this case, a general return to more primitive organization of actions in aphasia and a drop on the whole to a different genetic level, which we were able to establish in all of our experiments—all of this shows that the pathological disintegration of action and speech again, like its construction, does not occur along two independent, nonintersecting parallel lines.

*Editor's note: from the word "thouism," which Vygotsky uses as an antonym of the word "ego."
However, we considered this in sufficient detail when we presented our subject; essentially, all of the content of our work was devoted to this alone. Now the task is to condense the whole content into a compressed formula that would express with the greatest precision possible the very essence of everything we have found in our clinical and experimental studies of higher mental functions and their development and disintegration, specifically in the study of practical intellect.

From all that has been said thus far, we cannot decide with sufficient clarity how this follows from either the Gospel formula or from Goethe’s formula—regardless of which word is given the stress. We cannot, however, help but note that all of these formulas, including Gutzmann’s formula, of necessity require sequels. They speak of what was in the beginning. But what happened next? The beginning is only the beginning, that is, the initial point of movement. The process of development itself must, of necessity, include in itself the rejection of the initial point and movement to the higher forms of action, forms of action that lie not at the beginning, but at the end of the whole path of development. How is this accomplished? The attempt to answer this question inspired us to write this work. We tried in its continuation to show how the word, itself being intellectualized and developed on the basis of action, raises action to a higher level, subordinates it to the will of the child and places the stamp of the will on action. But since we wanted to present all of this in a short formula, in one sentence we might say: if the act, independent of the word, stands at the beginning of development, then at its end stands the word becoming the act. The word, which makes the action of man free.