

## Vygotsky and Vasilyuk on Perezhivanie: Two Notions and One Word

Marc Clarà

To cite this article: Marc Clarà (2016): Vygotsky and Vasilyuk on Perezhivanie: Two Notions and One Word, *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, DOI: [10.1080/10749039.2016.1186194](https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2016.1186194)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2016.1186194>



Published online: 18 Jul 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 5



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Vygotsky and Vasilyuk on *Perezhivanie*: Two Notions and One Word

Marc Clarà

University of Lleida

### ABSTRACT

In this article I discuss the difference between Vygotsky's and Vasilyuk's uses of the term *perezhivanie*. Arguably, this difference may have contributed to some of the current ambiguity regarding the notion of *perezhivanie* in cultural psychology. In short, I propose that Vasilyuk's *perezhivanie* can be understood as a special type of activity, whereas Vygotsky's *perezhivanie* can be better understood as a special type of meaning. I also propose that Vasilyuk's *perezhivanie* consists primarily of the semiotic transformation of Vygotsky's *perezhivanie*. After offering conceptual clarifications and examples based on Vygotsky's and Vasilyuk's writings, I illustrate these two notions of *perezhivanie* with a case of a teacher faced with pupils' disruptions in class. In this illustrative case, my analysis of the semiotic transformation of Vygotsky's *perezhivanie* during Vasilyuk's *perezhivanie* is based on the semiotic theory of Greimas.

### Experiencing as an active struggle: Vasilyuk's *perezhivanie*

In William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, the tyrant king of Scotland cruelly kills Macduff's whole household, including his wife, children, and servants. Macduff learns about the murders through the words of his cousin, Ross, in the presence of Malcolm, the legitimate heir to the crown:

Ross: Your castle is surprised; your wife and babes /Savagely slaughter'd: to relate the manner,  
/Were, on the quarry of these murder'd deer, /To add the death of you (...)

Macduff: My children too?

Ross: Wife, children, servants, all /That could be found.

Macduff: And I must be from thence! /My wife kill'd too?

Ross: I have said (...)

Macduff: He has no children. All my pretty ones? /Did you say all? O hell-kite! All? /What, all my pretty chickens and their dam /At one fell swoop?

Malcolm: Dispute it like a man.

Macduff: I shall do so; /But I must also feel it as a man.

(*The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Act IV, Scene 3; Shakespeare, 1907, p. 90)

This excerpt from *The Tragedy of Macbeth* beautifully illustrates the kind of phenomenon that led Fyodor Vasilyuk to propose the incorporation of a new type of activity into the theoretical and empirical domain of activity theory. According to Vasilyuk (1984/1988), this psychological tradition had been mainly focused either on object-oriented practical activity or on cognitive activity understood as mental reflection. By mental reflection, Vasilyuk (1984/1988) means the production of mental facts as "abstracted from the individual's volitional

sphere” (p. 37, footnote). In other words, the production of what is nowadays commonly understood as conceptual knowledge. Vasilyuk, who was mainly concerned with psychotherapy, noted that some situations require a type of work other than practical or cognitive work. Macduff, for example, when faced with the murder of his family, engages in cognitive work to understand what happened and reaches his conclusion: “What, all my pretty chickens and their dam/At one fell swoop?” This cognitive work, however, is of course useless to solve his situation. Then Malcolm suggests that he undertake a practical activity, that is, that he kill the tyrant Macbeth: “Dispute it like a man.” Macduff accepts (“I shall do so”), but he knows that this will also be useless to fix his situation, as no practical activity can bring his family back. His situation requires him to undertake another type of work: “But *I also must feel it as a man.*” This work, which Macduff calls “feeling it as a man,” is what Vasilyuk (1984/1988) called *perezhivanie*.

In the English version of Vasilyuk’s (1984/1988) book, *perezhivanie* is translated as *experiencing*. The problematic translation of the Russian word *perezhivanie* has been widely noted and discussed by Western scholars. I agree that this problem exists. However, there is a second terminological problem in both the words *perezhivanie* and *experiencing*, emphatically worked out by Vasilyuk, that has received much less attention in the literature and, to my mind, has even more problematic implications, namely, the distinction between Vasilyuk’s use of *experiencing/perezhivanie* and the traditional meanings of these terms in psychology and everyday speech.

According to Vasilyuk (1984/1988, pp. 23–24), in traditional psychological approaches, experiencing is mainly referred to as the subjective *contemplation* of the external world; that is, the world presents itself to the subject, with its own force, and the subject is just affected by it, passively and effortlessly. In contrast, Vasilyuk (1984/1988) proposed using the term *experiencing* in quite a different way, to refer to the active work that people conduct to overcome psychological states of impossibility. To distinguish between these two meanings, Vasilyuk talked of *experiencing-as-contemplation*, to refer to the traditional usage of the word, and *experiencing-as-activity*, to refer to the kind of phenomenon he aims to study (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 25). Throughout the book, however, he used just *experiencing* to refer to experiencing-as-activity, and when he refers to experiencing-as-contemplation he indicated it with an asterisk (“*experiencing\**”) (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 26, footnote). In my opinion, the term *experiencing-as-activity* is also problematic, as experiencing-as-contemplation could also be regarded as a kind of activity, or at least, as Vasilyuk himself suggested later in the book, as a part or aspect of an activity (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 201).<sup>1</sup> Thus, I propose that a more unambiguous name might be *experiencing-as-struggle*, which is the term I use in this article to refer to Vasilyuk’s *perezhivanie/experiencing*.

In short, the phenomenon under consideration can be described as follows: Imagine a person faced with a situation that causes her strong pain, suffering, and psychological disruption, who cannot do anything, whether practical or cognitive, to resolve the existential aspects of this situation. *Experiencing-as-struggle is the work that, faced with an existentially impossible*

<sup>1</sup>Specifically, Vasilyuk suggested the hypothesis that experiencing-as-contemplation is one step of experiencing-as-activity; thus, especially in certain types of experiencing-as-activity, the subject needs to consciously and subjectively contemplate how the situation affects her in order to begin to conduct the active work of experiencing-as-activity: “These propositions enable one to advance the hypothesis that *experiencing is multilevel in structure*. ... In each particular instance of the “*experiencing*” activity, the levels of consciousness detailed earlier come together for its realization into a functional unity unique to each instance, in which any one level may assume the leading role. In the passage quoted earlier ... the experiencing activity was mainly on the *unconscious level* (“the secret work of the soul”), with some active participation by the *level of direct experiencing\** (“the desire for some change in life, for freedom from something, and a sense of wanting to set off for somewhere”). ... In creative resolution of what are known as “*problem/conflict*” situations, the processes of the *reflective level* of consciousness are particularly important” (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 201).

situation, the person conducts in order to regain psychological equilibrium (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, pp. 18–19; see also p. 32). According to Vasilyuk (1984/1988, p. 28),<sup>2</sup> this same phenomenon had already been studied in other psychological traditions, under the names *psychological defense* or *coping*.

Thus, the first condition for experiencing-as-struggle is facing a situation of impossibility, that is, what Vasilyuk (1984/1988) called a *critical situation* (p. 32). As examples of critical situations, the author talked of the death of a loved one (p. 28); the situation of political prisoners in the Schlüsselburg fortress, forced to do meaningless physical work (p. 27); or the situation of Raskolnikov after his crime in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (Chapter 3). Arguably, the situation faced by Macduff would be a critical situation too.

### The semiotic mediation of experiencing-as-struggle: Vygotsky's *perezhivanie*

Basing himself on Vygotsky's main ideas, Vasilyuk (1984/1988, pp. 175–176) assumed that experiencing-as-struggle is semiotically mediated, including the trigger of the whole process, that is, the critical situation. Thus, Vasilyuk (1984/1988) argued that a situation is critical only to the degree that the subject sees the situation as such:

The actual character of a psychological situation is, in the last count, determined by the “internal state” created. Although a situation may be objectively insoluble, so long as the individual retains a belief in its solubility, ... that situation has not become critical in the exact sense of the term. Conversely, even if the situation is from the viewpoint of an outside observer entirely resolvable, so soon as the individual acquires a conviction of its being impossible the situation then becomes a critical one, with all its attendant consequences. (p. 39)

This is exactly Vygotsky's point of departure in a lecture known as *The Problem of the Environment* (Vygotsky, 1994a), in which he examined the influence of environment on the child. His main argument is that this influence is not fully determined by the objective conditions of the situation, but rather, more than anything, by the meaning that the situation has for the child: “The crux of the matter is that whatever the situation, its influence depends not only on the nature of the situation itself, but also on the extent of the child's understanding and awareness of the situation” (Vygotsky, 1994a, pp. 343–344).

In *The Problem of the Environment*, Vygotsky (1994a) was mainly concerned with the influence of environment on children's ontogenetic development. Accordingly, he offered several examples of children of different ages who, faced with violent behavior by their mother (p. 340), the death of a family member, a dangerous illness of the mother, or a parental separation (p. 343), understand their situations very differently and, consequently, are affected very differently by them. Vygotsky established a relationship between these observations and his previous studies on the development of word meaning, offering the general argument that a single situation affects children of different ages differently because the influence that the environment exerts upon the child is determined by the meaning that the child forms for her situation, and *children of different ages form word meanings in qualitatively different ways*:

One and the same event occurring at different ages of the child, is reflected in his consciousness in a completely different manner and has an entirely different meaning for the child. In connection with this, a quite complicated concept, but one which is very important for the understanding of how environment influences development, is of some interest. The concept has this connection because it represents the meaning of our words. (...) a child at different stages of his development does not generalize to the same extent, and consequently, he interprets and imagines the surrounding reality and environment in a different way. Consequently, the development of thinking in children in itself, the development of generalization in children in itself, is also connected with the way the environment influences children. So, as time goes by, the child begins to understand more and more. Now he is able to understand the things he could not understand earlier.

<sup>2</sup>See also the foreword to the English edition.

Does this mean that now some events occurring in the family will affect the child in a different way? Yes. (...) This means that the development of thinking in children in itself, the meaning of children's words, is what determines the new relationship which can exist between the environment and the different developmental processes. (Vygotsky, 1994a, pp. 345–346)

In a word, the crucial issue here for Vygotsky is *meaning*, in the same general terms in which he considered meaning formation in his ontogenetic research (Vygotsky, 1987), that is, briefly, that when incorporated in signs (especially words), meaning formation mediates psychological processes and transforms them structurally (Vygotsky, 1994b). This is indeed the same general scheme also assumed by Vasilyuk (1984/1988, p. 176). However, both Vasilyuk and Vygotsky noted that the meanings mediating how a given situation affects the subject have important peculiarities. Perhaps to highlight these peculiarities, Vygotsky used a special term to refer to this type of meaning: *perezhivanie*.

The *perezhivanie* arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment, determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child. Therefore, it is not any of the factors in themselves (if taken without reference to the child) which determines how they influence the future course of his development, but the same factors refracted through the prism of the child's *perezhivanie*. (Vygotsky, 1994a, pp. 339–340)

In the English translation of *The Problem of the Environment* (Vygotsky, 1994a), the term *perezhivanie* was translated as *emotional experience*. In my opinion, this translation is especially misleading, and that is why in the preceding excerpt from that work, as well as in those that follow, I have replaced the translation *emotional experience* with the original Russian word *perezhivanie*.

In my view, it is very improbable that when Vasilyuk wrote *The Psychology of Experiencing* he knew of the usage that Vygotsky had given to the term *perezhivanie* in *The Problem of the Environment*. Vasilyuk makes no mention of it, although he largely grounds his work on Vygotsky's, and wrote that

the category “experiencing” is not something we took up ready-made from outside the activity theory, from some other theory; what we have tried to do is rather to take the extra-scientific, intuitively comprehended idea of experiencing and “facet” it, using as tools the concepts and categories of the activity theory. (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 20)

Thus, I am inclined to think that the fact that Vasilyuk and Vygotsky both use the term *perezhivanie* is just a coincidence. This coincidence, as I have tried to suggest, is not due to the fact that they were both naming the same phenomenon; however, it is not entirely fortuitous either, as they were naming two different but related phenomena. More specifically, Vasilyuk was naming a type of activity, whereas Vygotsky was naming the type of meaning that mediates that type of activity. In other words, in my understanding, Vygotsky's *perezhivanie* semiotically mediates Vasilyuk's *experiencing-as-struggle*. From this view, and for terminological clarity, in the rest of this article I use the term *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky's sense *only*, that is, to refer to the specific type of meaning that mediates activities of experiencing-as-struggle.<sup>3</sup>

### The nature of *perezhivanie* as a type of meaning

I said in the last section that both Vasilyuk and Vygotsky noted that the type of meaning that mediates how a situation affects the subject—what I henceforth call *perezhivanie*—has certain peculiarities. The most important is that *perezhivanie* is not the meaning that one or another aspect

<sup>3</sup>I am not assuming here that this type of meaning *only* mediates experiencing-as-struggle; in fact, I assume that meanings of this kind always mediate, at a more or less conscious level, all types of activities (Clarà, 2014, 2015b). However, as Vygotsky proposed the term *perezhivanie* in relation to critical situations, here I use the term *perezhivanie* specifically as a semiotic mediator of experiencing-as-struggle.

of the situation has for the subject, but rather the meaning the subject forms for the *situation as a whole*, including all relevant aspects of the external situation and all relevant aspects of the subject facing that situation. In Vygotsky's words,

A *perezhivanie* is a unit where, on the one hand, in an indivisible state, the environment is represented, i.e. that which is being experienced—a *perezhivanie* is always related to something which is found outside the person—and on the other hand, what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this, i.e., all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in *perezhivanie*; (...) So, in a *perezhivanie* we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, which are represented in *perezhivanie*. (Vygotsky, 1994a, p. 342)

Vasilyuk (1984/1988) made essentially the same point when he stressed that experiencing-as-struggle is not about the production of what is nowadays understood as conceptual knowledge (the product of cognitive activity), but rather the meaning of the whole situation, approachable through the opposition meaningfulness-meaninglessness:

The third antithesis, meaningfulness-meaninglessness, has quite a different origin. Its source is in the concept of the “meaning-forming motive”. Only when a subject's activity, and the course of events in general, is proceeding in a direction tending towards realization of his meaning-forming motives, will the situation have meaning (be meaningful). If things are proceeding otherwise the situation becomes meaningless. (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 31, footnote)

Vasilyuk connected what I am calling *perezhivanie*, that is, the meaning that mediates experiencing-as-struggle, to what others have called *Gestalt* (p. 191) or *schematism* (pp. 176–177; the latter being the term Vasilyuk borrowed from Mamardashvili, Solovyov, and Shyryov to refer to this type of meaning in the last chapter of his book). Besides the holistic nature of *perezhivanie*, Vasilyuk also noted that this type of meaning is learned in ways different from formal scientific knowledge (i.e., conceptual knowledge), and he metaphorically described the way it is learned as “entering into” (p. 177). Actually, this type of meaning is not strange to Western psychology, and it has been observed and studied through many different approaches under several different names, although rarely in relation to the processes that I am calling experiencing-as-struggle (one exception is Teasdale's, 1993, *implicational meaning*). Some names that have been used to refer essentially to the same type of meaning, although within very different psychological approaches and in relation to different purposes and interests, are, for example, Schön's (1983) *framing* in relation to professional action, Arnold's (1960) and Lazarus's (2006) *appraisal* in relation to emotion (see also Clarà, 2015b), Johnson-Laird's (1983) *mental model* in relation to reasoning, or what I have called elsewhere *situational representation* (Clarà, 2014) in relation to teaching practice. In these notions, the holistic nature of this type of meaning, the difficulty of putting it into words, its often unconscious functioning, and its close relationship to emotion and life, are recurrently observed.

### The semiotic transformation of *perezhivanie* in experiencing-as-struggle

Thus far, I have differentiated between experiencing-as-struggle, which was the type of activity studied by Vasilyuk (1984/1988), and *perezhivanie*, understood as the type of meaning that mediates this specific type of activity, which I argue was Vygotsky's (1994a) focus. However, so far I have considered *perezhivanie* only at the very start of the process of experiencing-as-struggle, that is, only as determining whether a given situation is critical. Now we are ready to more fully consider the specific kind of work a subject must conduct in experiencing-as-struggle. In short, this work is primarily that of the semiotic transformation of the *perezhivanie*.

One can only say that in a situation of impossibility (meaninglessness) a person is faced with a “problem of meaning” in one form or another—not as this is spoken of by A.N. Leontiev in his activity-theory writings, where the task is to clothe in significations a meaning which is objectively present in the individual's life but not yet clear to his consciousness—here the problem is of arriving at meaningfulness, of seeking out sources of

meaning, of “exploiting” these, of actively extracting meaning from them, etc.—in short, of *producing* meaning. It is this general idea of *producing meaning* which enables us to speak of experiencing as of a *productive* process, as of a special kind of *work*. (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 33)

This deserves further comment, because both Vygotsky’s and Vasilyuk’s notions of *perezhivanie* are usually interpreted by Western literature as primarily referring to emotional phenomena. I have already argued that Vygotsky is talking about meaning when introducing the term *perezhivanie*, but perhaps it was not clear until now that Vasilyuk’s experiencing-as-struggle is also primarily about meaning. It is absolutely true that when experiencing-as-struggle is successful the subject faces emotional transformations, but the work the subject must conduct in this type of activity is, according to Vasilyuk (1984/1988), primarily semiotic:

but to offset the ingrained association or even equation of the words “emotion” and “experiencing”, still widely current in psychological literature, it must be especially stressed that emotion has no sole right to the starring role in the actualization of experiencing. The main part may be played by perception ..., and by thinking ..., and by attention ... and by other mental “functions.” (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 36)

Consider first the example of experiencing-as-struggle successfully conducted by the political prisoners in the Schlüsselburg fortress, as mentioned by Vasilyuk in relation to an analysis conducted by Leontiev (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 27). The prison authorities obliged them to move earth from one place to another for no reason. In the beginning of the process, the situation was understood by the prisoners as meaningless, as a kind of torture, not only physical, but also psychological; this was their *perezhivanie* at the beginning. The product of their experiencing-as-struggle was a complete transformation of this *perezhivanie*: They came to understand the pointless work as training the authorities were giving them as a present to keep up the physical and moral strength they would later need to fight autocracy. Of course, this implies an emotional transformation, but the work that experiencing-as-struggle basically consists of is a work of semiotic transformation of *perezhivanie*. Another example, carefully analyzed by Vasilyuk (1984/1988), is the successful experiencing-as-struggle carried out by Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. Here, again, the crucial work conducted by Raskolnikov is the semiotic transformation of an initial *perezhivanie*, after his crime, full of internal contradictions and based on a stance of superiority and difference in relation to others, into a new *perezhivanie* based on Christian ideas of fault-repentance-redemption-bliss:

First of all it was vital for him to re-think the meaning of his crime in terms of the new value system. Confessing to the crime was only the first, outward step towards such a re-thinking ... thus entering into the schematism not by way of bliss this time, but by way of fault admitted, at the same time disassociating himself from the crime, de-identifying himself with it (“... it was the devil killed the old lady, not I”). (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, pp. 191–192)

Thus, Vasilyuk’s analysis shows that, although a deep emotional transformation occurs in Raskolnikov, the main work he conducts in his experiencing-as-struggle is that of the semiotic transformation of his *perezhivanie*, that is, the transformation of the prism through which he saw and understood his situation.

## An empirical illustration

In this section I try to illustrate a little bit more carefully the semiotic transformation of *perezhivanie* in a case of experiencing-as-struggle performed by a teacher I call Carla. When I interviewed her, Carla was 31 years old and worked as a teacher at a school located in a middle-class neighborhood in the Barcelona metropolitan area. Carla reported a process of experiencing-as-struggle related to a situation of continuous disruption in her class. Clearly, at an initial point,

Carla saw this situation as critical, in the sense used by Vasilyuk, and it caused strong emotional disruption for her:

I think it was (a, I mean) a whole accumulation of things, like feeling bad at work, thinking “what am I doing?” and learning a bit about how to deal with what was going on in class, you know? Things that were really hard, where you think “Now what am I going to do? The child is saying no, right? I’m not any sort of authority figure for this person, so what am I going to do?” ... That made me, it made me feel a bit anxious, encountering things that made me think, “OK, maybe things aren’t going so well” ... Encountering children who would knock my pencils on the floor, you know? “I’m not going to do what you say, period.” Right? Or I’d have situations where, I don’t know, they would say, “I’m getting up,” and I would say, “Well, now we’re going to ... let’s sit down,” you know? Now it’s all under control, they would get up and they would say, “No. We’re not going to sit down just because you say so,” you know? Students who, maybe, in the middle of class had punched the wall and left a gaping hole in it, right?

In the interview, Carla explained in more detail one of these incidents and how she understood and conceived of the incident in that initial moment of her process. This makes it possible to examine Carla’s *perezhivanie* at the start of her experiencing-as-struggle.

It was because I said something like, “You have to do your homework” or “You haven’t done your homework. Give me your notebook,” and he ... he got really angry and hit the wall. Then, honestly, I felt really bad, really guilty, also, for everything that was going on, you know? And I kept thinking, “I didn’t handle that well,” you know? “I didn’t handle that well and that’s why the child hit the wall.” And ... well, basically, that. I feel ... I usually feel ... or rather, at that point, I used to feel more of that, more guilt, saying “it’s my fault,” or “it’s because I didn’t handle it well.” I don’t know how to deal with these attitudes, and that’s why these things happen, right? Or “Maybe they didn’t do their homework because I wasn’t clear enough” or “Maybe they don’t do their homework ...”, that kind of thing, you know? That ... went on every day, right? It really did happen a lot. “He didn’t do his homework. Why didn’t he do his homework? Maybe I have to talk more with his parents. Maybe it’s my fault.” And in that sense, you feel guilty, like you don’t know how to deal with the situation, like you’re not doing a good job, or, at least, that’s how I feel, like I’m not doing a good job, I’m not handling it well, I don’t know how to do it. Those are the kinds of messages that ... more in the first part.

To analyze Carla’s *perezhivanie*, I use Greimas’s semiotic theory. I do not have space here to adequately introduce this theoretical and analytical approach (see, e.g., Greimas, 1983, 1989; Greimas & Fontanille, 1992; Greimas & Rastier, 1968) or to explain the specific analytical procedures I used (for a detailed analysis protocol, see Clarà, 2015a). Suffice it here to say that Greimas conceives of meaning at different levels of depth: Discourse, made of words, is the surface of meaning, whereas the deepest level of meaning consists of a set of oppositions between pure semes. In my view, Greimas’s theory and observations are very consistent with Vygotsky’s, especially with those reported in Chapter 7 of *Thinking and Speech*, that is, that at deeper levels of meaning, discourse becomes progressively abbreviated, and the literal meaning of the words dilutes in favor of sense (Vygotsky, 1987). Greimas further articulated these ideas, and also did so methodologically. Basically, Greimas established three main levels of depth to study meaning: at the surface lies discourse; at the deepest level, there is an opposition of semes he calls the Constitutional Model; and in the middle, the semes of the Constitutional Model are articulated by anthropomorphic actants, structurally related to each other, in what he calls the Modal Arrangement. This will allow us to see at which level of meaning the transformations of Carla’s *perezhivanie* occur in her experiencing-as-struggle.

First, however, we have to describe her *perezhivanie* in the beginning of the process. Basically, at the level of the modal arrangement, we see in her *perezhivanie* a contradiction between Carla’s duty and her lack of ability. In her view, this contradiction causes an initial disruptive behavior by the child, which implies a new duty for Carla, which, in turn, enters into a new contradiction with her lack of ability. This new contradiction causes a second, even more disruptive behavior by the child, and so on. The basic modal arrangement of Carla’s *perezhivanie*, at the start of the process, could be represented as follows:

"Carla's *having to do*" vs "Carla's *not knowing how to do*"

>

"Child's *doing [disruption]*" > "Carla's *having to do*" vs "Carla's *not knowing how to do*"

>

"Child's *doing [disruption]*"

etc.

If we go deeper into Carla's *perezhivanie*, at the level of the constitutional model, we can see a basic opposition between one nucleus formed by the semes /instruction + knowledge + proximity/, mainly articulated by Carla's duty, and another nucleus formed by the semes /insubordination + ignorance + distance/, articulated by the child's doing and Carla's lack of ability. Because Carla's duty is unfulfilled, the situation is seen by Carla as one of insubordination, ignorance, and distance. Thus, the main opposition in the constitutional model of Carla's *perezhivanie* at the start of her experiencing-as-struggle can be represented as

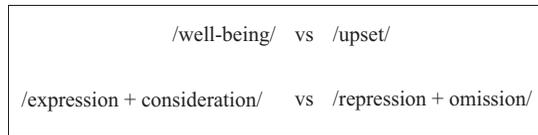
/instruction + knowledge + proximity/ vs /insubordination + ignorance + distance/<sup>4</sup>

From this situation of impossibility, Carla successfully conducted an activity of experiencing-as-struggle that led her to regain emotional stability and tranquility regarding the situation. In the following excerpt, she reports this emotional re-equilibrium and also shows how she transformed her *perezhivanie* during her experiencing-as-struggle:

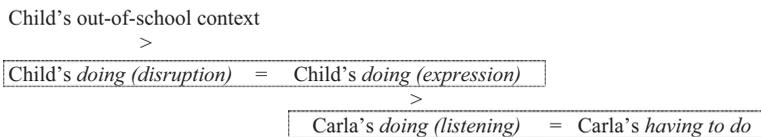
Yes, I think something has changed. Now I think more about ... about alright, what's going on here? Uh. Maybe I'm not to blame, you know? Maybe he just has this need. Or, alright, why doesn't he do his homework? Well, why? Let's look at why he isn't doing his homework. Let's look at what's going on with this child. When he gets home, what kind of environment does he have, you know? And in that sense, I'm more relaxed, in the sense that, well, I am there for him, I am by his side, and this ... I can't control whether or not the children do their homework. That's one thing, right? In the sense that I cannot control that. I control what they do here, not what they do out of school. And when there are situations like this, more complicated ones, when a student, well ... I think I'm calmer than I used to be, I think I'm learning, you know? I'm calmer, I'm more relaxed, I try to listen to the student. [...] Why did this child do that, you know? What is he trying to tell me? Whereas before it was all a bit ... uh ... different. I didn't approach things like that, asking "Why is he doing this to me? Or why..." or "What is he trying to tell me?" I never used to even think about that aspect. Now I'm working on it. Now I at least think about it and say "Let's go talk." And in that sense, I feel better, much stronger when I come here, and it's OK, whatever happens in class, I might or might not do a great job. But I have ... I have some strength in this sense, right? To look at the child and say "OK, here (I am). You can tell me what's going on with you, and I'll respect it."

Consider the new *perezhivanie* of Carla, as reported in this excerpt. Of importance, the child's disruption is no longer seen as insubordination, but rather as the child's expression of out-of-school problems. More important, the disruption is now seen as the child's way of telling Carla something, such that the disruption is now seen as an act of proximity (rather than distance) that deserves respectful consideration by Carla. In short, the whole constitutional model of Carla's *perezhivanie* has been replaced. The new constitutional model is made up of two basic oppositions and can be represented as follows:

<sup>4</sup>According to Greimas, the generative opposition in the constitutional model emerges as a scission of a kind of semantic magma that he called *thymic mass*. When this scission occurs, there is also a scission of the phoria, so one of the semic nuclei becomes euphoric (in this case, /instruction+knowledge+proximity/), and the other one dysphoric (in this case, /insubordination+ignorance+distance/; Greimas & Fontanille, 1992). To adequately represent this system of semic oppositions, Greimas considered, for each opposition, two more semic nuclei: the contraries of each nucleus of the generative opposition, so that the contrary of each nucleus implies the opposite of that nucleus. This set of four interrelated semic nuclei is represented by Greimas in what he called a *semiotic square* (see Greimas & Rastier, 1968). In our case, the contrary nuclei would be /no insubordination+no ignorance+no distance/ at the euphoric deixis, and /no instruction+no knowledge+no proximity/ at the dysphoric deixis. However, for the purposes of this article, and for the sake of simplicity in the exposition, it is enough here to work with the generative opposition only.



Thus, the situation, through the prism of the new *perezhivanie*, is at once a situation of *upset* and one of *expression and consideration*: The child's disruption is the expression of the child's being upset, and this expression is respectfully listened to by Carla. The child's being upset, on the other hand, has nothing to do with Carla; it is caused by out-of-school conditions, which are seen as impossible for Carla to control, and, therefore, as falling beyond her duty as a teacher. This articulation of the constitutional model in the new *perezhivanie* can be represented, at the level of the modal arrangement, as follows:



Note that, at the level of the modal arrangement, the contradictions have disappeared; Carla's duty is no longer equated with quashing children's disruptions, but rather with respectfully listening to the children's expressions as signified by these disruptions. Moreover, the feelings of being upset that these disruptions express are no longer caused, actively or passively, by Carla, but rather by something beyond her possibilities and duty as a teacher.

Thus, Carla's case illustrates and provides further support for the idea that experiencing-as-struggle consists primarily of the semiotic transformation of the *perezhivanie*. In this case, specifically, this transformation consisted of the replacement of the semic nuclei at the constitutional level and the elimination of contradictions at the modal arrangement level of Carla's *perezhivanie*.

## Conclusion

In this article I have tried to make four main points. First, Vasilyuk's work on *perezhivanie* is not the continuation or development of Vygotsky's initial work on *perezhivanie*. Instead, Vasilyuk and Vygotsky both used this term to refer to different (albeit related) phenomena. Vasilyuk was referring to a special type of activity that I have proposed calling experiencing-as-struggle, whereas Vygotsky was referring to a special type of meaning that mediates experiencing-as-struggle. Second, *perezhivanie* understood as a type of activity is not the same as having an experience or experiencing in the traditional sense, that is, there is a sharp difference between experiencing-as-struggle (Vasilyuk's *perezhivanie*) and experiencing-as-contemplation. Third, in both Vygotsky and Vasilyuk, *perezhivanie* is primarily about meaning: In Vygotsky it is a special type of meaning; in Vasilyuk it is a special type of activity mainly consisting of the transformation and production of the type of meaning Vygotsky calls *perezhivanie*. This type of meaning, however, has important peculiarities, among them its holistic nature and its close relation to emotional phenomena. Finally, I have also indirectly suggested that *perezhivanie* and its semiotic transformation in experiencing-as-struggle can be studied with the help of Greimas's theoretical and methodological instrumentalities. My hope is that these four points can contribute to the clarification of the notions of *perezhivanie* and facilitate scientific inquiry into them.

## References

- Arnold, M. B. (1960). *Emotion and personality. Volume I: Psychological aspects*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Clarà, M. (2014). Understanding teacher knowledge from a cultural psychology approach. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 43, 110–119. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2014.07.002
- Clarà, M. (2015a). *Protocol of semiotic analysis of teachers' narratives on emotion and resilience*. doi:10.13140/RG.2.1.2798.5367. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marc\\_Clara/contributions](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marc_Clara/contributions)
- Clarà, M. (2015b). Representation and emotion causation: A cultural psychology approach. *Culture & Psychology*, 21, 37–58. doi:10.1177/1354067X14568687
- Greimas, A. J. (1983). *Structural semantics: An attempt at a method*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Greimas, A. J. (1989). *Del Sentido II. Ensayos semióticos*. Madrid, Spain: Gredos.
- Greimas, A. J., & Fontanille, J. (1992). *The semiotics of passions. From states of affairs to states of feelings*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Greimas, A. J., & Rastier, F. (1968). The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints. *Yale French Studies*, 41, 86–105. doi:10.2307/2929667
- Johnson-Laird, P. N. (1983). *Mental models: Towards a cognitive science of language, inference, and consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lazarus, R. S. (2006). Emotions and interpersonal relationships: Toward a person-centered conceptualization of emotions and coping. *Journal of Personality*, 74(1), 9–46. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00368.x
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Shakespeare, W. (1907). *The tragedy of Macbeth*. Toronto, Canada: Morang Educational Company. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/stream/tragedyofmacwest00shak#page/n3/mode/2up>
- Teasdale, J. D. (1993). Emotion and two kinds of meaning: Cognitive therapy and applied cognitive science. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 31, 339–354. doi:10.1016/0005-7967(93)90092-9
- Vasilyuk, F. (1984/1988). *The psychology of experiencing: An analysis of how critical situations are dealt with* (R. English, Trans.). Moscow, Russia: Progress.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1987). Thinking and speech (trans. by N. Minick). In A. R. W. Rieber & A. S. Carton (Eds.), *The collected works of L.S. Vygotsky. Volume 1: Problems of general psychology* (pp. 39–285). New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1994a). The problem of the environment. In R. Van Der Veer & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *The Vygotsky reader* (pp. 338–354). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1994b). The problem of the cultural development of the child. In R. Van Der Veer & J. Valsiner (Ed.), *The Vygotsky reader* (pp. 57–72). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.