

---

## Introduction

In recent years Vygotsky has acquired the status of a grand master. His work represents more than a contribution to a specific field of psychology and provides a broad framework or way of thinking about and dealing with psychological issues. It is not uncommon nowadays for Vygotsky to be ranked alongside Freud, Piaget and others as one of the leading innovative voices of twentieth-century psychology and this is probably as a result of the translation into English of his six-volume *Collected Works*. In reading the *Collected Works*, we need to remind ourselves constantly that they were written by a young scholar in his twenties and thirties when most academic careers are only beginning to get off the ground. These are not the works of a thinker whose ideas have been incubated and honed over an extended period of time. Although Vygotsky's texts express a maturity of thought way beyond his years, they also exude a youthful exuberance in the overflowing of ideas that emerge from his works. Any life cut down in its prime represents an unfinished and incomplete story and this too is Vygotsky's legacy. It may also explain an intriguing and distinctive feature of Vygotsky's writing that is initially hidden from view. Extracting the main points or gist of a text usually means that one is left with a residue of non-essential or redundant material, but to attempt this exercise with Vygotsky's texts produces an unexpected outcome. Invariably, the residue that is left over turns out to be indispensable for understanding the gist, leaving the reader with no option other than to return to the beginning and incorporate the residue back into the gist. The recursive acts of reading demanded by Vygotsky's texts reveal the rich layers of meaning that are concealed beneath a literary style that seems designed to allow the reader to hear the writer thinking and grappling with ideas. To understand and appreciate Vygotsky's thought it is not enough to know what he says. Equally, if not more, important are the reasons and arguments he provides to support his theoretical ideas. For this reason, Vygotsky's theory does not lend itself to pithy summaries of the nutshell variety. Despite the catchiness of some of his better known comments such as '*Instruction is only useful when it moves ahead of development*'<sup>1</sup> and constructs such as the *zone of proximal development*, his

<sup>1</sup> Vygotsky (1987, p. 212; italics in the original).

theories attempt to do justice to the complexity of their object of understanding in a way that is often lost in the secondary accounts of his cultural-historical theory.

The publication of the collected works of an author represents a significant event and in the case of Vygotsky the significance is all the more special given that his texts were banned and unavailable for many years. The story of Vygotsky's short life is well documented, as is the fate of his writings at the hands of Soviet censors and of his ideas in the heads of his colleagues and students.<sup>2</sup> On both scores the account is not a happy one. Texts that survived and were translated into English were either abridged and inaccurately translated, in the case of *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1962), or artificially rendered into a book by selecting bits and pieces from various sources in the case of *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1978). But in the hidden hand of selection lies the inevitable excising of parts of texts in the name of some or other declared virtue such as clarity or economy.<sup>3</sup> A striking feature that is peculiar to the publication of Vygotsky's *Collected Works* is the inclusion with the original texts of various commentaries in the form of forewords, prologues, introductions, afterwords and epilogues. In itself, this may not seem exceptional, except for the most peculiar fact that with the translation into English of the *Collected Works*, it was deemed necessary to meddle with the original Russian texts by changing their order of presentation and to include an additional layer of 'local' commentators to add new introductory voices to each volume of the Vygotsky texts. It is interesting that no explanation or justification is offered for the inclusion of these voices, the assumption presumably being that some value or local colour is added by giving commentators an opportunity to vent their views and opinions. It could be argued that the opposite is the case and that we would be better served left to our own devices without having to read Vygotsky at every turn through the eyes of his commentators. It is as if there is a fear that someone may come across Vygotsky's texts stone cold and somehow be contaminated or corrupted by their full frontal exposure.

It goes without saying that commentary is an essential aspect of scholarship. However, this does not mean that the texts that were collected together and published to celebrate Vygotsky's life and work should also include as part of the translated collection sundry introductions that by their very presence intrude on the reader's attention. Having read the original text, it is one thing afterwards to encounter the reflections of Vygotsky's colleagues and students. But it is another thing entirely to be flooded with commentaries beforehand

<sup>2</sup> For example: Kozulin (1984); Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991).

<sup>3</sup> Discussing *Thought and Language* and *Mind in Society*, Glick (1997, p. xii) comments as follows: 'The judgments of what is dated, what is redundant, what is unclear, and in what terms, are contemporary judgments, and, as is inevitable, contemporary construction addresses contemporary needs and understandings of what the core problems are.'

by authors who do not seem to be blessed with special insights from which other readers of the English language with sufficient interest to read Vygotsky's original writings could benefit. By framing Vygotsky's texts with selected commentaries that ground his work in their own image, commentators are able to provide a form of supportive 'scaffolding' that lends a particular shape to an engagement with the text that follows. In this way, the commentaries, albeit inadvertently, constitute a subtle and indirect kind of pre-emptive censorship by providing a ready-made interpretive filter in front of the text. To an outsider, the additional English commentaries that are cast as part of the English translation of the *Collected Works* seem to suggest a kind of special authorial legitimacy as if invited between the covers of the *Collected Works* by the author himself.

### The *Collected Works* and editorial comment

The thought that editorial comment may be more intrusive than necessary arrived unannounced in my head while reading the chapter entitled 'Thought and word' in Volume I of the *Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky* (1987). The editors have inserted a rather odd footnote in relation to an important passage in which Vygotsky is comparing inner speech and external speech. He makes the point that whereas inner speech is speech for oneself, external speech is for others and they are different in kind. The presence or absence of vocalization is a consequence of the functional differences between the two kinds of speech. He continues the discussion as follows (p. 257):

External speech is a process of transforming thought into word; it is the materialization and objectivization of thought. Inner speech moves in the reverse direction, from without to within. It is a process that involves the evaporation of speech in thought. This is the source of the structure of inner speech, the source of all that structurally differentiates it from external speech.

The editors' footnote refers to the expression 'evaporation of speech in thought' and they comment as follows (p. 257):

It is apparent from the context that in using the expression 'evaporation of speech in thought', Vygotsky is referring to a qualitative change in the speech process with the act of thought, not to the disappearance of the word.

The editors' comment is odd for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it does not seem to be correct. It is not clear what they mean by the 'context'. From the surrounding sentences it does indeed seem that Vygotsky is referring to the disappearance of the word, and the same seems to be the case going backwards and forwards in the paragraphs of the text. In fact, towards the end of the chapter, Vygotsky returns to this point and again

uses the same expression of the ‘evaporation of speech in thought’ and he continues as follows (p. 280):

However, where external speech involves the embodiment of thought in the word, in inner speech the word dies away and gives birth to thought.

With the word dying away, in Vygotsky’s own words and context, the editors’ contrary claim that the word does not disappear seems dubious. But the issue is not simply whether or not the editors are correct. The question arises of why the editors thought it necessary at this particular point to assist the reader to understand the text given that this is not a translation matter or an editorial matter but a matter of interpretation that is usually, and for good reason, left to the reader. The comment is odd because it attempts to explain the text by referring not to some hidden or additional information available to the editors, but to the very same text and context that the reader has just encountered. If that context serves to give an expression a particular meaning then the reader should be able to ascertain this without any special help from the editors. It is also odd because, on the one hand, it simply explains what the word ‘evaporate’ means (qualitative change) but, on the other hand, tries to undo the meaning of the word. When water evaporates it changes its state from liquid to vapour (hence to e-vaporate) and, in the process, the liquid does indeed disappear or, to use Vygotsky’s phrase, ‘dies away’. There is no reason for us to assume that Vygotsky either did not understand the meaning of the word ‘evaporate’ or that he was careless in his use of the word. On the contrary, given that he later in the chapter uses the exact same expression again and in the same context, it seems likely that he did know and appreciate what he was saying.<sup>4</sup> If this is the case, then it would appear that it is the editors who are misreading the text and, perhaps, unintentionally misusing their editorial authority by stamping a particular interpretation of their own on the text. Written right at the end of his life, this text presents a number of new ideas that do not fit comfortably into the standard Vygotsky mould. Here he pushes back further and deeper into the innermost functions of the human mind and makes provision for developmental processes that originate and move from the inside to the outside. This may be a message that some contemporary Vygotsky spokespersons would prefer to overlook.

### The secondary literature

As with other major thinkers, a large secondary Vygotsky literature has developed, with book titles such as *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of*

<sup>4</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, Vygotsky (1997b, p. 61) also uses the term ‘dissolve’ to capture a process of change in which processes lose their separate functional identities, such as signs being dissolved in an overarching concept of tools.

*Mind*,<sup>5</sup> *Understanding Vygotsky*,<sup>6</sup> *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist*,<sup>7</sup> *The Essential Vygotsky*<sup>8</sup> and the (Cambridge) *Companion to Vygotsky*<sup>9</sup> appearing together with many other titles that include the name Vygotsky, such as *Vygotsky's Educational Theory*,<sup>10</sup> *Vygotsky and Pedagogy*<sup>11</sup> and *Vygotsky and Research*.<sup>12</sup> As yet we do not have a comic strip *Introduction to Vygotsky* but this omission will probably be rectified in the near future. As is the case for most leading thinkers, the secondary literature is something of a mixed bag. There are many ways in which a body of secondary literature can be organized and, in the case of Vygotsky, it is possible to distinguish a number of different strands of commentary within the secondary literature. In common with other bodies of literature around a central figure, there are commentaries that attempt to provide historical context with accurate summaries that deliberately attempt to capture the author's intentions, accompanied by considered and balanced reflections and evaluations of the work discussed. Good examples of this approach are the accounts provided by Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991, 1994, 2000<sup>13</sup>) as well as Kozulin (1984) and Bakhurst (1997, 2007).<sup>14</sup>

Other approaches attempt to go beyond Vygotsky and their commentaries about his cultural-historical theory tend to be couched in terms that are conducive to the promotion of their own theoretical systems. The main representatives of this approach are sociocultural activity theorists of various hues. A reader cannot help being struck by two pervasive characteristics of this literature. The first is that much of this secondary literature seems closed on itself, with the same authors in a spirit of mutual admiration and collegial approval recycling their same ideas in edited Vygotskian compendia such as those cited above. The second characteristic is that much of this secondary Vygotsky literature strikes a discordant note. Accounts of Vygotsky's theory seem out of tune with the original texts and more in tune with the writer's own views, with claims being made that Vygotsky's work provides a foundation for their theories that depart radically from his fundamental theoretical constructs. Increasingly, Vygotsky is being 'read' and understood through secondary sources and although, in itself, this is not necessarily problematic, it becomes so when the original

<sup>5</sup> Wertsch (1985).      <sup>6</sup> Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991).

<sup>7</sup> Newman and Holzman (1993).      <sup>8</sup> Rieber and Robinson (2004).

<sup>9</sup> Daniels, Cole and Wertsch (2007).      <sup>10</sup> Kozulin *et al.* (2003).

<sup>11</sup> Daniels (2001).      <sup>12</sup> Daniels (2008).

<sup>13</sup> See Valsiner and Van der Veer (2000).

<sup>14</sup> It is important to emphasize that no claim is being made, least of all by the authors mentioned as representative of this approach, to the effect that entirely neutral accounts of Vygotsky's work are possible. As is well known and appreciated, simply deciding what to include and what to exclude in any summary or secondhand account reflects an author's 'prejudices'.

texts are replaced by tendentious secondary accounts in which humdrum pedestrian ideas are substituted for Vygotsky's provocative and novel weaving together of ideas. There is, however, a didactic benefit that can be salvaged from the wreckage of Vygotsky's ideas that has occurred in some quarters of the secondary literature. In order to reveal the flaws in some of the more popular accounts of Vygotsky's theory, it is necessary to engage intensively with the original texts and, in this way, we are able to sharpen our understanding of the distinctive theoretical concepts that define Vygotsky's theory.

The purpose of this book is a twofold celebration of Vygotsky's legacy: on the one hand, by engaging in an exegesis of the last three chapters of *Thinking and Speech* in which most of the core theoretical concepts that constitute Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory are discussed; on the other hand, by engaging critically and vigorously with the secondary literature in which Vygotsky's legacy seems to be threatened not by neglect but by a kind of misguided over-enthusiasm for 'Vygotskian' ideas that never were.

### An outline of the book

Chapter 2 provides an overview of some of the main themes that are discussed in the book and also reflects the structure of the book as a whole in which, on the one hand, Vygotsky's texts are closely examined in order to extract the argument or reasoning behind a particular theoretical concept and, on the other hand, the arguments and interpretations produced by various commentators are critically evaluated. Two key theoretical concepts that permeate all aspects of Vygotsky's work are discussed: the role of 'psychological tools' or signs in his theory; and the nature and role of sociogenesis in the development of higher mental functions. Given the centrality of these concepts, it is imperative at the outset to clarify them and to show how together they provide the theoretical backbone of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory. These concepts enable the theory to contain as its object of understanding a conception of the person as a *social individual* such that any opposition between society and the individual is rendered untenable and unsustainable. In the case of psychological tools, Vygotsky's texts make it abundantly clear that he rejects the conflation of both signs and technical tools under a broader generic rubric such as that proposed by some contemporary 'sociocultural' or 'activity' theories. Following Vygotsky's arguments regarding the role of the *social* in the development of higher mental processes, it emerges that the meaning he attaches to the concept of *social* is closely tied up with the role of speech and the structure of the sign as a means of communication with others and with the self.

In addition to the above two themes, different approaches in the secondary literature that have emerged in response to Vygotsky's work are discussed, in particular a broad 'Western' approach represented by Cole and Wertsch that, by combining both their preferred terms, could be referred to as a 'sociocultural activity approach' and attempts from within the fold of Russian Activity Theory that include Leont'ev, Davydov and Radzikhovskii. In the case of the sociocultural activity approaches, a new orthodoxy seems to be taking hold in which Vygotsky's terminology is used while the underlying concepts, such as mediation, are distorted and others, such as consciousness, are ignored. This is discussed and illustrated in the accounts provided by Daniels in recent publications in which links are proposed between Vygotsky's theory and contemporary notions of situated and distributed cognition. Whereas the sociocultural activity approach produces a deformed version of Vygotsky's theory, the Russian activity approach adopts a different strategy in which all Vygotsky's core ideas are retained in their accounts of his psychological theory while attempts are made to carve out another, more authentic, 'methodological' Vygotsky who regarded practical activity as the main explanatory principle of psychological phenomena. The arguments in support of this Janus version of Vygotsky are not convincing and the notion of another Vygotsky as the original inspiration for activity theory seems more contrived than real. One further anomalous approach is briefly considered and this is Feuerstein's work on 'Mediated Learning', which provides an outstanding example of the application of Vygotsky's ideas. However, the anomaly lies in the fact that according to Feuerstein, his work, which includes a 'Learning Potential Assessment Device' and a cognitive intervention programme called 'Instrumental Enrichment', was developed independently of any knowledge of Vygotsky's theoretical and applied work. The chapter concludes by considering a 'metalogue' or imaginary interview that Rieber, one of the editors of the English translation of Vygotsky's *Collected Works*, conducts with 'Vygotsky'. Given the obvious loading of both the questions and answers by the author who writes the script for both the interviewer and interviewee, a set of alternative possible answers that convey a different message is provided for some of the questions posed by the interviewer.

Following this overview chapter, the book is organized into three parts.

### *Vygotsky at home*

In Part I, the last three chapters of Vygotsky's book *Thinking and Speech* provide the material for discussion. The chapter headings from the original text are borrowed and used as the headings for the chapters in this section. For each of the chapters, an attempt is made to present a clear account of Vygotsky's arguments and mode of reasoning, including any warts that are exposed in the process, rather than extracting the main points to construct a

summary of the content.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the content, each chapter from the original text provokes an engagement with conceptual issues that arise out of the text but are not explicitly elaborated as part of the text. In Chapter 3, Vygotsky's well-known 'Experimental study of concept development' is discussed.<sup>16</sup> The emphasis in the discussion in this chapter is on the way Vygotsky traces the steps in the development of concepts and, in particular, on the introduction of an argument about a second 'root' of concept development that is seldom mentioned<sup>17</sup> but without which the development of proper concepts would remain incomplete. Accounts of Vygotsky's theory of concept formation typically mention a progression from complexes to pseudoconcepts to proper concepts. This, however, is an oversimplification and omits the fact that in order to explain the step from pseudoconcepts to proper concepts, Vygotsky introduces a second 'root' or developmental path in which 'potential concepts' provide the essential link to the formation of proper concepts in adolescence. This second root originates in preverbal practical activities, and the argument Vygotsky presents brings his explanation into close alignment with Piaget's later account of cognitive development that originates in the sensorimotor intelligence of infants and in which stages follow in a set sequence defined by different cognitive operations. The reason for the inclusion of the second developmental root in his explanation of concept formation is that the operations necessary for the formation of proper concepts are missing in pseudoconcepts and, true to his developmental approach, Vygotsky is compelled to look elsewhere for an explanation of the origins of these operations. The significance of the overlooked second root explanation is that it calls into question the explanatory role of sociogenesis in Vygotsky's theory and, with his back to the wall, Vygotsky is compelled to acknowledge, albeit reluctantly and in an uncharacteristically roundabout fashion, the formative role of intrinsic natural factors in the development of proper concepts. Vygotsky's criticisms of Piaget, many of which were directed at concepts that Piaget later revised, are discussed and evaluated in the context of his own theory of concept development in which, contrary to some popular versions, he rejects explanations that rely on social factors to generate proper logical concepts. In what appears to be a reversal of the conventional wisdom

<sup>15</sup> Glick's (1997, p. xiv) comments in relation to Vygotsky's book *The History of the Development of Higher Mental Functions* are applicable to all his texts. '(Vygotsky) is not well served by serving him up as a finished product with the answers to all of our questions. What others have taken to be disorganized and rambling and repetitive I take to be the essential process of working through a profound theoretical position.'

<sup>16</sup> Chapter 5 in *Thinking and Speech*.

<sup>17</sup> For example, the role (and consequences) of the second root in Vygotsky's explanation of the development of concepts is not discussed in the summary accounts of this aspect of his work by Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991, pp. 262–7), Kozulin (1990, pp. 151–67) or Wertsch (1985, pp. 99–102).



about Piaget and Vygotsky, it seems that it is the former who provides an explanation for the operations that render social exchanges between people possible.

Vygotsky's text on the 'Development of scientific concepts'<sup>18</sup> is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. This text is not well served by its title. The term 'scientific concepts' does not capture either the phenomenon Vygotsky addresses or the full extent of the concepts he discusses under this heading, including conscious awareness, imitation, instruction, development and the zone of proximal development. Undoubtedly one of the key texts Vygotsky produced, it resembles a monograph both with respect to its length and the breadth of its content.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the chapter on the 'Development of concepts', in which the work of Piaget is barely mentioned,<sup>20</sup> the chapter on the 'Development of scientific concepts' is written almost as a rejoinder to Piaget, whose ideas provide a potent backdrop for Vygotsky's own thinking. In this chapter, Vygotsky formulates his ideas largely in opposition to his understanding of Piaget and this presents a difficulty for the contemporary reader given that Vygotsky's Piaget was very different from the Piaget with whom we are familiar, being limited to the latter's early works and ideas, many of which Piaget subsequently revised long after Vygotsky's death. Compounding this difficulty is the irony that the main criticism Vygotsky directs at Piaget is that he relied on external social forces to explain development, the very explanatory factors that are regarded by most contemporary commentators as the hallmark of Vygotsky's own approach.<sup>21</sup>

To do justice to the scope of this chapter, it is necessary to tease out the layers of meaning through which Vygotsky weaves his complex arguments. As a preliminary step in this direction, discussion on the text is presented in two separate chapters. The first of these, Chapter 4, attempts to show how Vygotsky builds his argument drawing on a number of core concepts whose separate meanings are crucial for the coherence of the argument as a whole. This chapter follows the same structure as Vygotsky's text and is organized into sections that mirror his text. Although all the sections that constitute the chapter on the 'Development of scientific concepts' are seldom free of references and allusions to Piaget's work, an attempt is made, where possible, to defer discussion about Piaget to the following chapter in order to avoid the triple tasks of simultaneously trying to follow Vygotsky's arguments, his understanding of Piaget's arguments and his critique of these arguments that, in turn, inform his own ideas. Perhaps the most important concept that

<sup>18</sup> Chapter 6 in *Thinking and Speech*.

<sup>19</sup> It is in fact longer than the text of *Tool and Sign*.

<sup>20</sup> There is a fleeting reference to Piaget (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 149).

<sup>21</sup> For example, Kozulin *et al.* (2003, p. 1) state that 'At the heart of Vygotsky's theory lies the understanding of human cognition and learning as social and cultural rather than individual phenomena.'

emerges from a close reading and analysis of the text is that of *conscious awareness*, which also provides an anchor for the other concepts discussed in this chapter. Without the concept of conscious awareness, it is difficult to make sense of Vygotsky's claims in respect of the role of instruction in development, in particular the oft-cited claim that effective instruction runs in advance of development. The theoretical arguments that bind together the rich array of concepts that Vygotsky assembles into the very kind of conceptual system whose development he is attempting to explain have suffered from summaries that limit the discussion to the bare bones of the distinction between 'spontaneous concepts' generated by the child and 'scientific concepts' generated in the process of instruction.

Following on, Chapter 5 is concerned with critique and evaluation of the ideas presented by Vygotsky in this chapter on the development of scientific concepts. It is organized differently from the previous chapter with sections devoted to the central concepts of imitation, conscious awareness, instruction, development and the zone of proximal development. However, before discussing these concepts, Vygotsky's engagement with Piaget is given centre stage. Overlaps in the properties of Vygotsky's 'scientific concepts' and Piaget's 'spontaneous concepts' are discussed, as well as Vygotsky's reliance on a notion of 'rich and mature concepts' that develop outside of a context of instruction and provide a necessary condition for its efficacy. Vygotsky's reliance on an unexplicated conception of imitation at the heart of human learning and development leaves his theory of instruction vulnerable to attack.<sup>22</sup> However, his concept of conscious awareness and its role in development, despite being ignored or underplayed in popular accounts of his theory, provides the ground for the effective operation of the instruction process and, consequently, an explanation for how learning is possible in the zone of proximal development. The chapter ends with discussion on learning and teaching paradoxes and the way in which Vygotsky and Piaget's theories can be brought into a relationship of productive complementarity.

Chapter 6 is devoted to 'Thought and word',<sup>23</sup> one of Vygotsky's last works that ranks among the most evocative and poetic texts he produced. If read on its own and unconnected with the preceding chapters of *Thinking and Speech*, it presents a very different picture from what we are accustomed to reading in accounts of Vygotsky's work. Coming as it does at the end of the book, the chapter has a capstone feel that also seems to extend beyond the boundaries of *Thinking and Speech* and to cover his theory as a whole. In this chapter we encounter Vygotsky in a different register, less concerned with development, more involved with the mature end product of the developmental process, and exploring the innermost regions of the human mind. From the previous

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of Vygotsky's concept of imitation see Chaiklin (2003, pp. 50–5).

<sup>23</sup> Chapter 7 in *Thinking and Speech*.