

**THE INDIVIDUAL'S PLACE IN CULTURE:  
METAPHORS FOR CULTURAL BEHAVIOUR**

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**ABSTRACT**

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, was extremely interested in the development of thought, language and action. This paper reviews some of his key concepts such as mediation and internalization which he developed to explain the formation of higher psychological functions. These ideas are then complemented by a discussion of recent studies on the processes of metaphoric structuring. Metaphors, as organizing principles, enable both individuals and cultural groups, to change their behaviour and psychological functions.

**RÉSUMÉ**

Lev Vygotsky, un psychologue Russe, était extrêmement intéressé par le développement de la pensée, du langage et de l'action. L'auteur examine plusieurs de ses concepts principaux, comme par exemple, la médiation et l'internalisation, qu'il développa afin d'expliquer la formation des fonctions psychologiques supérieures. Ces idées sont ensuite complétées par une discussion d'études récentes se rapportant aux processus de structuration métaphorique. Les métaphores, en tant que principes organisateurs permettent aux individus et aux groupes culturels de changer leurs actions et de transformer leur fonctionnement psychologique.

One of the major areas of research in the social sciences is the relationship between the individual and culture and it is one which has remained unresolved for many decades. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist working in the 1920-30's, was extremely interested in the development of cultural behaviour, particularly in children. Unfortunately, his experimental and theoretical studies were interrupted by his premature death in 1934 and the subsequent suppression of his writings by Soviet authorities. Since the English publication of Thought and Language in 1962, there has been a resurgence of interest in Vygotsky's developmental schema.

This paper seeks to review some of Vygotsky's ideas and to present for discussion a complementary theoretical position. George Lakoff, a linguist and Mark Johnson, a philosopher, recently published a work in which they argue that "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action (1980:3)." It was Vygotsky's contention that the development of higher psychological functioning which was unique to man, comes about through active participation by each individual with the world which results in qualitative changes in the structure of the mind. Metaphoric structuring enables both individuals and culture to understand and aid in the development of psychological functioning.

Vygotsky believed the development of the individual could only be understood by studying how and why a person thinks the way they do in terms of the history of their behaviour within their particular cultural milieu. Communication, whether through speech or behaviour, is primarily social in nature. For infants, the first forms of communication are social, they are constructed by the environment of the child and by the relationships with the people in that environment. As children's experience deepens, as their understanding of language increases and their thought processes become more differentiated, there are definite structural changes in their cognitive processing. The new behaviours arising from these changes are partly social, partly biological. In time, children's thought and speech processes merge along the same lines of development and forms of independent thought and logical, abstract, conceptual thinking emerge. The ways in which we consciously and unconsciously choose our metaphors to establish meaningful relationships is one way in which the individual can change culture.

Much of Vygotsky's work assumes a biological evolutionary model, but it is a model which encompasses a dialectical basis to account for qualitative changes. Just as nature is very important in the development of cognitive functioning, so too is man's role in altering nature during the course of development. As individuals we do not passively accept the conditions thrust upon us from outside, each experience we have significantly alters the structure of our thinking and of our speech. This is not to say however, that he is advocating a psychology which studies past events but that "to study something historically [means] to study it in the process of change (Vygotsky 1978:65)."

In this paper I will take as my starting point the concluding remarks of Vygotsky in Thought and Language.

"Thought and language, which reflect reality in a way different from that of perception, are the key to the nature of human consciousness. Words play a central part not only in the development of thought but in the historical growth of consciousness as a whole (1962:153)."

Culture, a concept with many meanings 1, is a blend of both conscious and unconscious patterns and structures deriving from the individual's interaction with other people and the natural environment. The relationship between thought, spoken language and action, is of crucial interest for Vygotsky in attempting to understand the nature of human consciousness.

Important in his theories are the notions of internalization and mediation, processes

whereby psychological functioning undergoes basic structural changes leading to new and adaptive behaviours, both externally and internally. It is during the process of internalization, which every child undergoes, that the external forms of communication, social in origin, are transformed to internal structures for organizing individual behaviour. In this way the higher psychological functions, which are derived from the cultural forms, are transmitted to the child. He then uses these cultural forms in collaboration with his own experiences to organize his own thought. It is at the stage when external experiences become internalized that the inner plane of consciousness is developed.

Consciousness, for Vygotsky, is not an innate structure, it is formed during the process in which the higher psychological functions are formed. This can be seen in the stage where children start to develop language and differentiate perceptual fields. Infants do not possess language, nor do they possess consciousness, for consciousness involves being aware of the activities of the mind - it is self-reflective (Vygotsky 1962:91). This self-reflective state requires structures in the mind which operate on a second-order level, hence the importance of meaning as a mediating structure. The development of

"sign-using [mediated] activity in children is neither simply invented nor passed down by adults; rather it arises from something that is originally not a sign operation and becomes one only after a series of qualitative transformations (Vygotsky 1978:46)."

This dynamic relationship between thought and language is most clearly understandable in terms of word meaning. Words as such do not refer to single objects but rather groups or classes of objects - they are essentially generalizations (Vygotsky 1962:5) and therefore structure reality according to culturally determined categories, not naturally occurring ones.

Viewing cognitive processes in terms of their historical development allows for the genesis of word meanings as well. This becomes important when understanding the metaphorical structure of our conceptual systems because of the many entailments metaphors acquire. When naming objects

"in the contest between the concept and the image that gave birth to the name, the image gradually loses out; it fades from consciousness and from memory, and the original meaning of the word is eventually obliterated (Vygotsky 1962:74)."

This can be seen clearly in the development of meaning within the metaphorical structures. Metaphors by their nature are open-ended concepts, being defined in terms of their particular interactional properties.

In the course of his experimental work Vygotsky became much more interested in the genesis of language and its relation to the development of thought processes. He came to the understanding that the relationship between thought and speech is found in meaning. As children grow and learn they begin to infuse their world with meaning which is determined by their relationships and experiences with the culture in which they are immersed. He proposed four stages of development in the interactive evolution of thought and language that he believed were at the basis of all psychological functioning.

Similarly these four stages can be discerned from the analysis of cultural behaviour into its component psychological functions.

"If the doctrine that in certain spheres the behaviour of the individual is a

function of the behaviour of the social whole to which he belongs is valid at all, it is precisely to the sphere of the cultural development of the child that it must be applied (Vygotsky 1929:424)."

The direction of change in these stages is from external to internal, from the social to the individual. The first stage is the primitive or natural psychology - a 'naive psychology'. In this pre-verbal, pre-intellectual stage the child does not differentiate between objects and ideas; signs have no meaning, words and things are just words and things. Movements such as pointing to a teddy bear gain meaning for the infant as much through the social interaction with its mother as through any immediate desire for affective gratification. In the second phase, as the child's experiences increase, he learns to use intermediary signs for memorizing objects. The child begins to structure his environment with meaning by using tools and words with a purpose. This stage is fairly transitory and leads to the third stage where the external activity of the child starts to become internalized. The third phase is characterised by the use of egocentric speech and of external signs for solving internal problems. In the fourth stage the relationships between things and ideas becomes structured and internalized. At this point the child starts generalizing ideas across concepts internally in the same way he generalized his experience externally in the earlier stage.

Vygotsky clearly shows how the developing child creates new forms of behaviour through utilizing language. The psychological functions of perception, attention and movement are shown to be fundamentally altered in their structure by the child learning to use speech as an organizing principle. The child perceives the world in a simultaneous field of vision. It is through the use of language, which is structured sequentially, that the child acquires knowledge of discrete objects and begins to place them in some sort of meaningful pattern. It is by establishing relationships between objects, with language as the mediating factor, that children structure their cognitive processes.

"The retardation in the development of logical reasoning and in the formation of concepts is due here entirely to the fact that children have not sufficiently mastered the language, the principal weapon of logical reasoning and the formation of concepts (Vygotsky 1929:417)."

If Vygotsky is right in his reasoning and if we take this to its logical extreme, then adults in other cultures must also reason logically and form concepts, but within the frames of reference of their own language. The examples he uses of a man equating wood with tools such as saw, hammer and nails is not less logical than our categories (Wertsch 1985:34). It only means his experiences within his cultural context have structured his thinking to incorporate the materials with the tools as one category, for in his reality, hammer, nails and a saw are not tools unless one has wood to use them with, they are only objects in the environment.

However, thought and speech do not have the same ontogenetic basis since the development of reasoning precedes that of speech. The development of reasoning precedes that of speech. The development of reasoning involves processes whereby the child learns the significance of words as signs and that the meaning is not the same as the word. It is only from this point that thought and speech begin a parallel evolution. This realization in children, that there is a difference between the word and the sign, that there is a second order symbolism involved, leads to a restructuring of the thinking process which in turn leads to new behaviours. It is at this point that children's verbal behaviour is transformed, that the child begins to use metaphoric structures to express his experiences.

"Our analysis accords symbolic activity a specific organizing function that penetrates the process of tool use and produces fundamentally new forms of behaviour (Vygotsky 1978:24)."

This process of mediation is an integral component of change in psychological functioning leading to new and adaptive behaviours. During the course of their growth children are confronted by tasks which they are unable to solve. They learn to use auxiliary signs such as pictures and objects to aid in memory, etc. which creates new structures for psychological functioning. It is the mediating function of the auxiliary signs which lead to the development of higher levels. These structures do not remain static either but continually undergo changes according to the specific culture.

Vygotsky was interested in understanding how this transformation of thought structures actually took place. He did not view play as essentially pleasurable in the life of the child, but rather as an activity whereby children begin to use their imagination to solve problems. For this reason he investigated the role of play in children's activity very carefully. In preschool children the visual field of perception and the semantic field are not clearly separated. It is through imagination that children begin to free themselves from the constraints of reality. By using cultural rules of behaviour in situations that are outside their own reality children begin to internalize the structures which they perceived as operating externally. The only way they can generalize these experiences is by creating new structures in their own cognitive processes. Just as their perceptual fields become more structured so too does their thinking. Activities become determined by ideas rather than objects, now the meaning of things is predominant rather than the object itself.

In the same way actions become restructured cognitively with meaning becoming the predominant focus. Actions are no longer constrained by the physical realities of the situation and the child is open to conscious choice and volition of will, just as they are able to think in more abstract concepts than before. These structural changes are a major transformation in the development of the child.

"The play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction-development relationship, but play provides a background for changes in needs and in consciousness of a much wider nature. Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives - all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development (Vygotsky 1966:16)."

As Vygotsky was immersed in the reorganization of Russian society following the 1917 Revolution, he was strongly oriented towards understanding and generating educational strategies for learning in children. As he believed experience changed the basic psychological structures during a child's development, it was critical to incorporate this idea within a framework of learning and development. Unlike other theorists of his time he believed that learning and development follow similar lines of evolution but that the developmental process lags behind learning. Actual development, during which children can solve problems independently, was the traditional methodology for psychological testing in his time, but Vygotsky felt this was only a retrospective measure of maturation. It is in studying the zone of proximal development, the distance between actual development and the level of potential development, that it is easiest to see the process of development in formation. In the zone of proximal development are the prospective qualities available to each child, where the expansion of learning capabilities

occurs. This is closely related to Vygotsky's ideas of the role of play in the development of higher psychological functions. He believed children use play to form new behaviours beyond their everyday reality. Specific instruction was good when it served the same purpose to "awaken and rouse to life an entire set of functions which are in the stage of maturing, which lie in the zone of proximal development (1985:71)."

As individuals we all have personal experiences deriving from our action and interaction during the maturation process. In order to communicate our thoughts to others we need to be able to simplify and generalize those experiences, to create expressions which have a symbolic meaning which is understandable to others. Thought processes which operate as metaphors allow us to share experiences because metaphors are structural processes which order our thinking in coherent relationships.

Lakoff and Johnson differentiate non-metaphorical concepts which are derived directly from experience and metaphoric concepts which are mediated, of which there are three types (1982:194). (It is interesting that these correspond to the natural, biological and mediated, social lines of development noted by Vygotsky.) The criteria for a structure to be a metaphor is that the relations between the two parts involve different kinds of activity and there is only a partial structuring, that is, only certain aspects of a concept are used. The first part of a metaphor is commonly referred to as the metaphoric subject while the second part is known as the metaphoric predicate which works to clarify the subject through the application of appropriate attributes known as entailments (Schultz and Lavenda 1987:155).

These metaphoric entailments allow us to focus on different aspects of experience as they provide different models for us to understand action. One of the developmental phases which Vygotsky marks out is the time when a child begins to differentiate perception and sensory-motor operations. This separation creates new structures of thought in the child's psychological processes and metaphor allows for the expansion of ideas to explain the new experiences.

The reasoning (which precedes language) children use to explain their new experiences is a form of cultural behaviour and so are the words and meanings a child uses.

"When children develop a method of behaviour for guiding themselves that had previously been used in relation to another person, when they organize their own activities according to a social form of behaviour, they succeed in applying a social attitude to themselves. The history of the process of the internalization of social speech is also the history of the socialization of the children's practical intellect (Vygotsky 1978:27)."

In Western culture for example, children often 'make-believe' they are teachers or nurses or firemen. These models of behaviour are used by children amongst themselves to form hierarchical relationships. As adults we recognize these behaviours and can influence children's social attitudes by our own judgments. "He is a born leader" will move a child into a different relationship with his peers if we choose a metaphor of leadership capabilities as being innate over a metaphor which says "A man can learn leadership qualities". Here the emphasis is on acquired capabilities rather than inherent one and if a child grows up thinking that all leaders are born, not made, it will affect his social interactions with others.

Language provides the data that can lead to general principles of understanding. Individuals think in terms of systems of concepts, not single words. Principles of understanding are often metaphoric because they try to explain one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience. Concepts emerge not only from direct experience but are also structured by the dominant cultural metaphors.

"When basic metaphors of a scientific theory are extensions of basic metaphors in our everyday conceptual system, then we feel that such a theory is 'intuitive' or 'natural' (Lakoff & Johnson 1981:205)."

What was originally a metaphoric entailment now becomes the subject and is used to explain other areas of experience. In this way cultural behaviours become internalized unconsciously by children during their maturation. It is through the conscious manipulation of different metaphors that individuals are able to bring about change.

In this discussion of language, thought and consciousness, some of Vygotsky's ideas of development have been discussed in their relationship to an expanded understanding of the structural properties of metaphor. He is proposing a system of progressive change whereby the experiences and actions of children are structured by higher psychological functions which in themselves are socially derived. Thought and language are related in so far as they share meanings which are also culturally derived. Where the process of change, of the individual's interaction with the environment becomes important, is that as each one of us has personal experiences which must be generalized to be shared, we must utilize new metaphors depending on what part of our experience we wish to highlight.

In this same way, conscious choice of certain metaphors will encourage different behaviours. The organizing principles we choose to structure our own cognition will greatly influence our perception and understanding of experiences in the real world. We can see in our own culture, for instance, there is an ongoing debate over abortion. A Catholic priest, raised and trained within the tenets of the Catholic church, will rationalize his beliefs on the issue quite differently from a member of a pro-choice group, by virtue of his acquired knowledge and perceived meaning. This interaction of meaning and culturally acquired forms of behaviour we as adults transmit to our children.

In my readings of Vygotsky's work he seems less interested in the movement from individual to culture than from culture to the individual. Working within a Marxist idiom it is not surprising that he was concerned with the degree to which cultural forms of behaviour affect individual development. But suppose we take Vygotsky's work to its logical conclusion and complete the cycle. As he is very insistent on development being an historical process and that man's interaction with the environment brings about qualitative changes, then there must be a point at which his theory can take account of that movement. It is here that I believe the importance of metaphorical structuring becomes most important. As children we are provided with cultural means of behaviour from our communication with other people. As we grow, we structure our thinking in terms of our social attitude and come to perceive reality according to our schemas of experience. At some point we must impinge those ideas and structures back into the social fabric. As long as there is little or no change involved in those ideas, it will be difficult to measure the impact of the individual on his/her culture. However, when individuals begin to make choices about the kinds of metaphors they use to explain their experiences, this can begin to imperceptibly or even radically transform their culture. I believe that many such cases come about by metaphors which we consciously choose in our attempts to sway people to our way of thinking or to account for changed conditions in our world.

One of the most significant features of Vygotsky's work was his insistence on the dynamic nature of psychological functioning. He was not content to view individual development or cultural development operating as static, complete systems. The development of individual psychological functioning was an ongoing, transformative process which involved not only quantitative changes but also qualitative ones. From the undifferentiated world of the infant to the plane of abstract, conceptual thinking of the

adult, each individual passed through a number of distinct phases of development. ^The actions and experiences the individual underwent in the course of this evolution was not biologically predetermined but depended rather on the interactions with the people and objects of the surrounding environment. Where Vygotsky differed from many theorists was in his insistence that these experiences and actions brought about qualitative structural changes in the individuals thought and language.

#### NOTES

1. As Clifford Geertz points out in a classic example the concept of culture is defined in over 10 ways by Clyde Kluckhohn in one chapter of Mirror for Man. These definitions; "the total way of life of a people; the social legacy the individual acquires from his group; a way of thinking, feeling and believing; an abstraction from behaviour; a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; a storehouse of pooled learning; a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems; learned behaviour, a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour; a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men; [and last but not least] a precipitate of history" (Geertz 1973) each highlight one aspect of culture but all add to the meaning of our concept. Some will be less useful and will drop from our vocabulary while others will generate new meanings. In the same way, Geertz himself, in The Interpretation of Culture, generated a powerful shift in meaning for the anthropological discipline itself. His definition of culture entailed yet another metaphor - that of man being suspended in webs (culture) of significance (1973:5)."



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