From 'external speech' to 'inner speech' in Vygotsky: A critical appraisal and fresh perspectives

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical exploration of the arguments for the 'internalization' of speech in Lev Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology. Vygotsky's conception is predicated on the existence of three forms of speech – 'external', 'egocentric', and 'inner' – and pictures a developmental process of 'internalization' in which the first is transformed into the second and third. Vygotsky's case is built around the linguistic and communicative properties of these putative speech forms. The paper argues that the whole conception is informed by the 'segregationist' assumptions about language that constitute what integrationists call the 'language myth'. In particular, Vygotsky's view that 'external speech' is 'internalized' takes for granted the segregationist position that language constitutes a self-contained system which maintains its identity and integrity as between people and contexts. The paper, therefore, rejects the internalization conception and tentatively considers how the communicative phenomena discussed by Vygotsky may be treated differently if viewed from an integrational linguistic perspective. The more general implications for the validity of cultural-historical psychology are briefly examined.
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1. Introduction[1]

This paper continues the critical exploration, begun in Jones (2007), of language theory in Lev Vygotsky's 'cultural-historical' psychology (e.g., Vygotsky, 1986). I will focus here on certain linguistic notions that are crucial to Vygotsky's approach, namely those of 'external speech', 'egocentric speech' and 'inner speech' along with the process of 'internalization' which, in Vygotsky's system, relates these three forms of speech. The discussion of these phenomena will attempt to bring to bear the critical perspectives on theories of communication developed in the 'integrationist' work of Harris (1981, 1996, 2006).

In Vygotsky's developmental (or 'genetic') view, language ('speech') has a pivotal role to play in the emergence of distinctively human forms of thinking and action in the child. Through a process of 'internalization', 'external', or 'social', speech, is transformed from a directly interpersonal, communicative means of regulating and directing the child's behaviour into 'inner speech', the medium of the child's own personal consciousness and will and of his or her capacity for purposeful and independent action. The halfway house in this internalization process is 'egocentric speech' or, the term preferred nowadays (Wertsch, 1979), 'private speech'.

In more prosaic terms, Vygotsky is attempting to account for our ability to do things 'mentally' or 'in our head'. Roughly speaking, the main idea is that we have to first learn to do things publicly – 'externally' – with others before being able to do them 'internally'.[2] Having first learnt to do sums in the classroom with teacher using pen and paper, we later find ourselves able to do 'mental' arithmetic. Similarly, we learn to read out loud and then 'silently'. More broadly, the capacity to *think* to ourselves, to inwardly reflect on what we are doing, to guide our own actions purposefully and self-consciously, depends on 'inner speech', a specially adapted 'inner' form of language use which, according to his premise, must derive from the 'external' practice of using language in dialogue with others. In themselves these claims were not original or unique to Vygotsky's theory. However, Vygotsky bolstered his own speech internalization hypothesis with detailed claims about the *linguistic* properties of his different speech forms. In particular, drawing heavily on contemporary linguistic ideas, he argued that utterances in 'egocentric speech' (and, by extrapolation, those of 'inner speech') had a peculiar elliptical structure which must be the result of clipping, abbreviating or reducing the expanded and complete utterance forms of 'external speech'. In other words, Vygotsky's psychological theory – a whole conception of what it means to be human, no less – is built around a particular conception of language. And if that conception should turn out to be implausible, what then for the Vygotskian tradition?

In this paper, then, I will approach Vygotsky's linguistic journey of 'internalization' critically and sceptically, drawing on the 'integrationist' critique of orthodox linguistics and, for want of a better term, on common sense observations. I will argue that key aspects of the internalization conception are, indeed, implausible on communicative grounds and will suggest how the phenomena in question may be viewed differently if we change our assumptions about language and communication.

I should acknowledge from the outset that controversy surrounds Vygotsky's concept of 'internalization'. What exactly did he mean by this term? And how can the phenomena he sought to account for best be understood? Some scholars, for example, prefer the term (and the idea of) 'appropriation' to 'internalization' (Tolman, 1999). My discussion, however, is not about the relative merits of 'internalization' or 'appropriation' but *about what it is that is thought to be 'internalized' or 'appropriated'*. In other words, it is about how *language* itself is understood and, more specifically, the problem of trying to build a developmental psychology around particular linguistic assumptions.

2. Cultural-historical language theory: where is it?

Language theory is the poor relative in cultural-historical research. There is, in fact, no distinctive cultural-historical linguistic thinking at all (Jones, 2007). Vygotsky himself was not an original thinker when it came to language theory per se. In fact, one can see in the very foundations of the cultural-historical approach the imprint of traditional and ancient prejudices according to which language, as the expression of human spiritual power, is both the key to the self and the foundation of social life.[3] Furthermore, Vygotsky borrowed both fairly liberally and pretty much uncritically from contemporary linguistic research in which language was, by and large, taken to be a well-defined and self-contained public system of symbolic forms and grammatical rules. Luria, for example, who was a close associate of Vygotsky and one of the founders of cultural-historical psychology, has no qualms whatsoever in describing language as 'a system of codes signifying objects and actions' (1982: 27), as 'a system sufficient in itself for the expression of any abstract relationship or thought' (1982: 28).

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[2] See Melser (2004) for a detailed discussion of these 'doing things in the head' metaphors and a forceful critique of 'internalization' accounts.

[3] For detailed discussion of Vygotsky's linguistic influences, see Wertsch (1985), Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991), and Seifrid (2005). A fuller treatment of language theory in Vygotsky is underway (Jones, in preparation).