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Semantic Consciousness and Inhabiting a Linguacultural Community: A Sociocultural Approach

Abstract

Vygotsky's final ambition (see Veresov and Moc 2018) was to transform his previous work into a dynamic, interfunctional perspective of personhood centered on consciousness. What he was able to accomplish before his untimely demise focused primarily on the unity of cognition and affect. Human consciousness, as considered from the perspective of sociogenesis, necessarily involves how people come to inhabit the ecosocial world around them, moving from the social to the psychological. For Vygotsky, language is transformed in this process, becoming primarily semantic in inner speech, and together with *perezhivanie*, or how a person experiences an event/environment (interpretence), mediates consciousness. How we come to inhabit a language, culture, languaculture, or extemporaneous community, whether consisting of speakers of many languages or just one, necessarily involves our associations with language and experience at the intrapersonal level in formulating shared levels of interpretence interpersonally as well.

1. Introduction

From a Vygotskian perspective, how people come to inhabit their cultural-historical contexts through sociocultural activity was a key aspect of Vygotsky's overall research. By the end of his career, Vygotsky believed that human consciousness is mediated through the interconnection of the external and internal worlds and principally through the intersection of language and experience (Zavershneva 2014, 76). Vygotsky's way for understanding this process was the "genetic method," which focuses on psychological development as it unfolds both macro- and microgenetically

across time, which led him to posit the “law of psychological development,” that development first appears through social interaction and then psychologically through internalization, a transformative process, leading to the dynamic interaction of society and the individual. However, because his empirical research primarily focused on children and adolescents, it is important to emphasize the capacity for agency that typifies adults (see Arieviditch 2017), who although driven by societal and psychological needs to belong, also exercise control over the degree to which such needs encompass different aspects of their lives.

Vygotsky (1987) accorded language at the semantic level, in particular, a pivotal role in consciousness both with regard to establishing concepts and in relation to personality, although he recognized that other forms of sign and cultural artifacts also mediate consciousness activity. Additionally, he incorporated emotional development (*perezhivanie*) as a key aspect of his theorizing, for example, as involved in self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-consciousness as mature psychological functions. Vygotsky (1987) also drew a connection between motivation and *perezhivanie* as an aspect of the future in the making in relation to the affordances and constraints that a person experiences both socially and with regard to personality. For example, some people grow up in a world in which the use of multiple languages is experienced, where there are lingua francas that function for use in specific communities as associated with domains of activity, or where the intermixing of two or more languages in the form of code-switching is an everyday aspect of language use. As such, semantic consciousness in relation to interacting with others in meaning/sense-making, and how we come to inhabit a languaculture (or not), is an area within the field of applied linguistics worthy of attention.

2. Semantic Consciousness

Vygotsky had recognized the importance of language in consciousness early in his career. His dissertation, *The Psychology of Art* (1971), was finished by 1925 and at one level concerns the quale of cultural-historical consciousness in exploring subjectivity as produced through different genres of creative writing. Also, in 1925 Vygotsky explicitly called for an end to the dualism of subjectivist and objectivist accounts in psychology through “materializing” consciousness, methodologically, which he argued was necessary for the study

of all psychology (Vygotsky 1999). He was able to accomplish this materialization to some degree himself, if still far from achieving a theory of consciousness, his final pursuit (Zavershneva 2016).

When Vygotsky returned to the study of consciousness in the 1930s, he looked to Spinoza in attempting to construct a theory of emotions (Vygotsky 1997b), but was unable to do so. However, he formulated his concept of *perezhivanie* in the last year of his life (Vygotsky 1994) as a unit of consciousness in relation to emotional development. *Perezhivanie* addresses how a “personality” (person) experiences an event/environment as a “refractive” (interpretive) process, not simply “reflective,” which Vygotsky dismissed as inadequate to studying psychological development. Additionally, central to *perezhivanie*, Vygotsky considered experiences of the past as impacting the present and as leading to potential futures, including imagination in conjunction with emergent activity as a form of material psychology in connection to motivation – for example, children dressing up in their parents’ clothes (Vygotsky 1978). This concept allowed him to take a substantial step in addressing personhood as a whole.

Following Marx, Vygotsky viewed the intertwining of language and consciousness as initially stemming from the social world: “Language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well” (Marx and Engels 1974, 50-51, cited in Eagleton 2016, 19). The primary unit in Vygotsky’s study of language and consciousness, however, and one that he had considered from the beginning of his career, is word, which in the end he regarded as “a microcosm of consciousness” as found in the last paragraph on the last page of his posthumous volume, *Thinking and speech* (Vygotsky 1987, 285). Through his examination of word, Vygotsky created two overlapping levels of meaning, *znachenie* or meaning at the social level and *smysl* or sense at the intrapersonal level. Vygotsky defined sense as “everything in consciousness which is related to what the word expresses” as linked to “the internal structure of personality” (276). By 1932, Vygotsky had come to an understanding of consciousness as a dynamic semantic (“semic”) system as found in *Thinking and Speech*. *Perezhivanie* includes all forms of sense (Zavershneva 2014, 91-92) as a part of interpretive processes. Speech is vital to *perezhivanie*, or as expressed by Vygotsky as early as 1924 (1997a, 77): “Speech is, on the one hand, the system of the ‘reflexes’ of social contact and, on the other, the system of the reflexes of consciousness par excellence, i.e., an apparatus for the reflections of other systems.”

In attempting to understand the psychological functions of language in consciousness at the intrapersonal level, Vygotsky (1987) proposed a psychological structure for private and inner speech, which he believed are both predicated on contextualized meaning (the "psychological predicate"), whether dependent on internal or external stimuli. For example, the utterance, "keys?" as a form of private speech, might be motivated by the fact that the speaker's keys are not in the place they usually are or perhaps the worry that they were left in another location all together. Meaning/sense could be connected to surprise, annoyance, anxiety, and so on – it is not the externalization of the word, but how it is contextualized in consciousness that is necessary to understanding significance in private speech.

Vygotsky used his analysis of private speech to contemplate and objectify inner speech, the deepest level of intrapersonal psychological functioning in which word is still entailed. Vygotsky (1987, 277) argued that there is "a predominance of sense over meaning, of "phrase over word," and of "the whole context over the phrase." Moreover, as a critical aspect of inner speech, inner sense, is "incommensurable with the word's common meaning" (279), and inner speech is close to thinking in "pure meanings" (280), which also entails "operat[ing] not with the word itself but with its image" (262). Overall, Vygotsky argued that "The communication of consciousness can be accomplished only indirectly, through a mediated path. This path consists in the internal mediation of thought first by meanings and then by words" (282). Also, although Vygotsky (1987) mostly focused on language/word, he included other signs as part of mediation in consciousness and cultural artifacts as well, for example, a clock or a sun dial.

Potentially, we are affected by all forms of sense, including as found in our immediate surrounds, and on a moment-to-moment basis. For example, when interacting with others, sense is affected by facial expressions, blushes, posture; hairstyle, clothing, and jewelry; the building we are in, the music that is playing, the décor of the room, the air temperature, the language we are speaking, and so on (all signs), much of which takes place as unconscious meaning-making activity. We are constantly engaged at different, dynamic, interfunctional levels of interpretation that come together as a unified consciousness state, or as stated by Vygotsky, "Consciousness as a whole has a semantic structure. We judge consciousness by its semantic structure, for sense, the structure of consciousness, is the relation to the external world" (Vygotsky 1987, 137, underline and italics original). Meaning/sense for Vygotsky is the essential component of consciousness as embedded in

cultural-historical contexts of activity and as experienced/interpreted by a person in relation to events and environments.

3. Inhabiting a Language and a Culture?

The sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1973), used the term “inculcation” to describe the degree to which community members are subject to the forces of enculturation, specifying language as the leading agent in this process. However, this is the “strong” version of the theory¹. In countering this stance, Lemke (2002, 74), argues that we are less bound to “the habitus of class, gender, sexuality, [and] culture [than] Bourdieu’s idealized model of modernist identity presumes.” This weaker version of habitus would seem to apply to many people today, in part owing to the influence of changing societal circumstances, including multinational, multiracial, and multiethnic plurality (or super-diversity) having increased as the world has grown smaller owing to migration and social media, which have brought about a more global sense of connection for many. This is not to argue, however, that social belongingness is any less of a force, but that it has been extended beyond the limitations of mid- to late-twentieth century habitus to include virtual communities as well, providing more scope for identity than when people were largely confined to their immediate surroundings, including intersectional identities through belonging to different communities, as is true for those who use *lingua francas*.

Within a community, Thibault (2004, 176) argues that “Meaning is stored, not at the level of the individual *per se*, but at the level of contextual configurations which integrate individuals to their ecosocial environment and therefore to the systems of interpretence that are embedded in these.” For example, with regard to language, intellectual communities put considerable emphasis on the use of “scientific” language, also the case for legal and many other professions where there are established interpretive norms. In other communities, it is what you do, not what you say, that is most valued – being an artist, dock worker, or secretary, although the use of technical language as opposed to everyday language is still expected to varying degrees. It seems safe to say that the vast majority of people around the world earn a living on the basis of everyday, social language, interpretence

¹ Kramsch (2015, 463) argues that Bourdieu’s concept is not utterly ‘deterministic’ despite the view taken by many scholars.

remaining at the level of society at large or as negotiated with immigrant and other workers for whom there are special language considerations.

According to Rosa (2007, 304-305), in a process he entitles “actuation,” or becoming a part of a new community, “the new-comer becomes attuned to the socio-cultural environment making it a part of his/her own *Umwelt*, at least to some extent.” Moreover, Rosa contends that “Newcomers are subjected to mastering the use of objects and symbols, pragmatically, semiotically, and semantically, something that can only be done by participating in socio-cultural practice” (305). This level of participation can eventually lead to an image of self, “as an object among others, as an agent and as an actor” (308). On this view, people become able to interpret and participate as members, but as adults, there is agency in doing so; some practices are more accepted than others, and others are resisted (consciously or unconsciously).

Rosa (2007) also considers community forms of practice as dramaturgical activity. We perform in order to learn how to conform, which has its roots in sociogenesis. As adults, we are all actors in performing social roles. Moreover, as Newman and Holzman (1993) note, we also transform through our activity of performing. This is the case for each of the social positions we occupy, whether we are deeply engaged or only on the periphery in the way that Bakhtin (1981) contends that we are “heteroglossic” in relation to different social discourses: how we speak to our families, store clerks, friends, colleagues, and so on. But the extent to which these roles become internalized and the ways in which we carry them out makes both conformity and conventionalization jagged constructs. The term actuation is also limited, suggesting that change is only a one-way process, but of course newcomers also change their ecosocial environments as part of the self-other dialectic that surrounds interaction and internalization. Also, communities can be emergent, developing interpretence through interaction over time as leading to a larger group, a society, a culture – or not, simply remaining momentary or short-term engagements.

The principle of alterity (otherness), applies to individuals in communities as an underlying aspect of human consciousness and development: We are constantly configuring others in relation to ourselves, which is illustrated by Bakhtin’s (1981,) concept of addressivity with regard to meaning-making, or as stated by Salgado and Gonçalves (2007, 611) “... [a] person is always in a process of a new becoming, in a living act of addressing other people”. However, despite the seeming constant renewal of

addressivity, Bakhtin (1981, 293-294, cited in Rosa 2007, 307) considers how words as more stable cultural, conceptual objects (if changeable at the same time) are “appropriated:”

The word of language – is half alien. It becomes ‘one’s own’ when the speaker inhabits it with his intention, his accent, masters the word, brings it to bear upon his meaningful and expressive strivings. Until that moment of appropriation [...] the word exists on the lips of others, in alien contexts, in service of other’s intentions.

Inhabiting a languaculture at this level is what is expected of native speakers across many of the social roles inhabited in a culture and suggests a shared sense of meaning in consciousness, that is, that we come to know others as we know ourselves, not only through language but shared experience/history as well. At one point in the history of the English language this was a common meaning for the word consciousness (co-consciousness) as found in the writings of the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1651/1914², cited in Natsoulas 2015, 26-27). Certainly, Marx in his assessment of the relationship of language to consciousness (above) viewed the two as operating together at the societal level but discounting possible individual differences, although aware of them. But unlike Marx, Vygotsky (1987) ascribed different functions to inter- and intrapersonal language in consciousness and its manifestations.

An illustration of the difficulty of reaching the state of shared language as leading to shared sociocultural consciousness for L2 speakers in a L2 environment (a native-speaker centric viewpoint) is found in Bram Stoker’s novel, *Dracula* (1981³ cited by Gee 1996, 90-91), where the Count expresses his frustrations about not being able to pass as a native speaker of English, his main concern is not meaning-making per se, but rather the experience of otherness:

‘But, Count,’ I said, ‘you know and speak English thoroughly!’

He bowed gravely. ‘I thank you, my friend, for your all too-flattering estimate, but yet I fear that I am but a little way on the road I would travel. True, I know the grammar and the words, but yet I know not how to speak them.’

‘Indeed,’ I said, ‘you speak excellently.’

‘Not so,’ he answered. ‘Well I know, that did I move and speak in your London, none there are who would not know me for a stranger. That is not enough for me. Here I am noble, the common people know me, and I am master. But a stranger in a strange land, he

² Hobbes, Thomas. 1994. *Leviathan*. London: J. M. Dent.

³ Stoker, Bram. 1981. *Dracula*. London: Penguin Books.

is no one; men know him not - and to know not is to care not. I am content if I am like the rest, so that no man stops if he sees me, or pause in his speaking if he hears my words. I have been so long master that I would be master still - or at least that none other should be master of me.'

It is likely that the Count would have felt more at home in today's London, a time at which not sounding (or moving) local does not mean that you are not, although feelings of alienation as related to usage still can have a negative impact, and in the same way.

Vygotsky (1987) recognized that there is a dialectical unity between language and consciousness at the inter- and intrapersonal levels, that one is not simply a reflection of the other. For Vygotsky (1994), the two levels dynamically inform one another, but internalization as an aspect of *perezhivanie* also implies refraction, that meaning is transformed in the same way light goes through a prism. An example of this relationship, again involving use of a L2, is provided by Hoffman (1989, 107, cited in Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000, 165):

I wait for that spontaneous flow of inner language which used to be my nighttime talk with myself ... Nothing comes. Polish, in short time, has atrophied, shriveled from sheer uselessness. Its words don't apply to my new experiences, they're not coeval with any of the objects, or faces, or the very air I breathe in the daytime. In English, the words have not penetrated to those layers of my psyche from which a private connection could proceed.

Hoffman no longer has the vital connection she once felt through inner speech in the L1, affecting the unity of thought, language, and subjectivity in consciousness. Her experience of the ecosocial environment she currently inhabits has created a mental vacuum of sorts caused by a loss of relevance for the first languaculture, a void which the L2 is unable to fill. In Vygotskian terms, the L2 has not moved into the realm of inner sense-making at the level of the psyche, or at least in regard to the specific function Hoffman mentions.

4. Embodied Meaning-Making

Meaning-making through signs is also embodied through nonverbal forms of communication, including movement, facial expressions, gaze, posture, body language, gesture, and so on, becoming recognizable to members of a languaculture or community, mediating semantic consciousness both inter- and intrapersonally as well. For example, "... when a young child pretends to

drink from an empty cup and looks playfully to the adult's face, one could say that in addition to pretense for the self this is also an iconic gesture to share this representation with the adult, communicatively" (Tomasello 2008, 152), while simultaneously moving into systems of interpretence that "frame" a languaculture, allowing for shared consciousness/intersubjectivity.

In fact, Vygotsky (1978, 56) noted that a child first enters the world of semiotic mediation through the proto-gesture of reaching for an object that is too far away, an adult bringing the object to her or him. In this case, sign mediates the behavior of others, a central aspect of human language as connected to real-world activity. However, there has been much speculation about the relationship of speech and gesture (co-speech gesture) psycholinguistically, over the years but there is almost universal agreement that the two are closely interconnected.

McNeill (2012; 2005; 1992) argues that speech and gesture combine in the unfolding of a thought in communication (both inter- and intraprsonally). The two modalities each bring different affordances. Speech provides a linear, segment-by-segment unfolding of meaning, while gesture is non-combinatoric, presenting meaning holistically and spatio-motorically, carrying meaning in a more direct iconic, memetic fashion than speech, (an upward sweep of the arm on the word "grow" with the utterance, "They just grow so fast"). Other gestures, however, are codified as emblems such as the shrugging of the shoulders to mean "I don't know" and are cultural. Gestures also carry sense as well as meaning, for example through muscular tension, finger articulation, the exaggeration of a gesture in space, and as culturally and/or idiosyncratically based. Importantly, gestures also can function as part of the negotiation of meaning when no common language is shared, for instance in recorded examples of first contact during the period of European exploration by ship (Vandenabeele 2002). We also gesture when thinking or during other private forms of speech activity. Additionally, although most people are largely unaware of their own nonverbal activity, gesture is very much a part of identity, members of different discourse communities also adopting different forms of gesturing in addition to community-specific gestures (McNeill 1992).

Moreover, typological differences among languages also impact gesture production, L2 studies having investigated whether or not advanced and naturalistically exposed speakers of a L2 that has a different typology from the L1 (motion events) change their gestures to conform to L2 speech production (co-expressiveness). Results indicate that this does happen, but

not typically at all levels of grammatical difference (Stam 2015), despite the lack of need to do so linguistically. These findings seem to imply a unity in consciousness as attached to meaning-making in a language, that there is an embodied/cultural schema underlying language in use as argued by cognitive linguists, and that people come to accommodate changes unconsciously whether through observation of others or as an accommodation as to how thought is unfurled according to patterns of speech in conjunction with underlying embodied schema embedded in the L2. However, contextualization in relation to identity must also be considered. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the role of imitation in development, as in the example from Tomasello (above), but as an adult, not everyone is comfortable imitating new gestures or forms of gesturing in relation to linguacultural learning (see Peltier and McCafferty 2010).

5. Lingua Francas

From a Vygotskian perspective, cultural-historical experience is vital to the genesis of sociocultural consciousness in development, language having the most significant role in this process. If a person grows up bi/multilingually in a culture and has constant exposure to a language as a part of everyday experience as found for English in Europe for many people (e.g., Berns, de Bot, and Hasebrink 2007; Graddol 2006; Seidlhofer, Breiteneder and Pitzl 2006), then the semiotic mediation of consciousness, both inter- and intrapersonally, likely also entails the use of English, whether domain specific or as found in code-switching. There is also the phenomenon of translanguaging to consider, as a “trans-semiotic” system that primarily employs linguistic meaning from different languages (Garcia and Wei 2014, 42). This perspective recognizes that sense-making occurs differently in different languages and the cultures that ground them. It could be argued that there is an almost explicit effort to understand how language affects meaning in consciousness through translanguaging.

With regard to forming nonverbal interpretence in LF/L2 environments, Haught and McCafferty (2008), for example, found that a small group of L2 adult students from different linguacultural backgrounds studying English in the U.S. imitated the teacher’s use of gesture after he was asked to model the lines of a script they were rehearsing (the use of gesture was inadvertent on the teacher’s part as an act of dramatizing the lines). Also, the students

imitated each other's gestures when watching a video of themselves rehearsing the same script, but only the gestures first initiated by the teacher. These two incidents are forms of private rehearsal, appropriating specific gestures as accompanying dialogue and thought to be "native-speaker like" as an aspect of coming to interpret and inhabit their classroom and languaculture surrounds. In an additional example involving movement and not just gestures, Bragg (2017) found that native-speaker tutors and university international students in a writing tutorial situation bodily accommodated one another through synchronizing movements, mirroring body language, posture, gestures, and head movements in relation to interactions concerning the language and content of an assignment. Shared attention is a means to create shared consciousness, embodiment clearly playing a part in the process.

Speech in LF contexts is significant as leading to internalization for one reason or another, would also be expected to be found in private speech (true for gestures and other communicative signs). Inner speech, although remaining a rather mysterious realm, involves semantic meaning-making activity which would include a LF and accompanying semiotic systems if internalized. However, inner speech is exclusively inward, remembering that private speech is still audible, making it a good deal more "linguistic" than inner speech needs to be, which, again, is closer to thinking in "pure meanings."

However, if the LF is used for business concerns, interaction primarily taking place through phone calls and electronic forms of communication, then relations between language and semantic consciousness perhaps would be viewed differently than in the scenarios above. In these instances, social interaction may differ depending on both the quantity and quality of engagement. If the LF primarily functions for transactional purposes, language activity corresponding to doing not being as instrumental, then semiotic mediation in consciousness may not be tied to the LF. However, the negotiation of meaning would still take place, which includes "...disattending to speech perturbations and non-standard features in linguistic form" (Firth 1990, 249) as part of "interactionally supportive behavior" (256). In these circumstances, it still seems possible that at times a shared level of semantic consciousness might develop between interlocutors as leading to intrapersonal contextualization in private and/or inner speech.

A final area of consideration is language contact, for example, international conference attendees. Although participants are likely to share English as a LF, if that is the language of the conference, and able to follow

discourse related to professional matters, this does not mean social interaction in the LF will follow the pragmatics of native speakers as a “target” (House 2003). Instead, social interaction is dependent on the participants of any one particular group and often operates as a multilingua franca, and monolingua EFL users also can be involved. Other considerations besides language also exert influence of course, including status, age, gender, personality, and so on, as affecting language use. In many such cases the analogy to a “community of practice” (Wenger 1998) has been considered, that members have a common endeavor, although a gathering at a conference for lunch may not reflect any particular community goals, and is not in this sense a community of practice (Ehrenreich 2009).

However, in all LF interactions, as with interaction in general for the purpose of communication, shared interpersonal interpretence is necessary at some level if semantic consciousness is to align in a meaningful way. In order to effectively do so, there has to be some level of suspension of assumptions, that another person may not be saying exactly what they mean, that they might want to renegotiate meaning. Additionally, interlocutors have been found to use one another’s gestures during conversation, to shore up a sense of shared meaning when one speaker is less proficient in the LF (McCafferty 2002). Such negotiations appear to be an aspect of what Bakhtin (1981) characterizes as renewal as key to his notion of addressivity, but which also can involve suspending aspects of identity to one degree or another as well, and would seem an aspect of gaining LF multicompetence.

Inner sense is inextricably tied to consciousness, but in line with Vygotsky’s (1987) thoughts, not words and their meaning as found in everyday speech but transformed for intrapersonal functions as associated with experience, associations, images, and particularly sense. If this is the way language functions privately, then it is not surprising that we are able to operate linguistically with others when adherence to form as culturally based in pragmatics is not tied to any one languaculture, meaning-making becoming emergent, remembering that for Bakhtin (1981) this is also the case for native speakers, if not to the same degree (at least in most instances). Inner speech would seem to entail a vast store of semantic information that applies to intellectual, emotional, and phenomenal experience in conjunction with, but not entirely dependent on, language, and certainly not on language only at a conventional level.

6. Conclusion

Communities, no matter if they are monolingual, bi/multilingual, multilingua franca, or established for impromptu purposes, all need to establish shared social meaning. Given that this is the case, it appears that an extension of the community of practice model also to function as a model for LFs would seem somewhat misplaced. Wenger (1998) focused on task oriented performance, while LFs focus on finding shared levels of interpretence and at one level or another of standardization – from a discipline-based undertaking to a spontaneous gathering. Moreover, and no matter the linguistic nature of the community from the L1 to the L5, meaning-making is always to some degree emergent, and analogous to what poets do (Vygotsky 1987). As such, LFs do not exist as impoverished codes. There are conditions in which signs are meant to be limited such as the use of gestures at a saw mill (Kendon 2004) where hearing others above the noise of the machinery is not possible, but the need for communication still vital. Studying the linguistic features and structure of a LF without reference to the people and the environment, although significant at one level of understanding, does not suffice to capture the human experience of meaning-making.

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