

VYGOTSKY AND THE ZPD: HAVE WE GOT IT RIGHT?

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For Julia Gillen (2000), the present day distortions in the interpretation of the ZPD are a result of deficiencies of earlier translations. Although Gillen is right with respect to the present day distortions she may be wrong in identifying original translations as the source. Based on Rowlands (2000), it will be argued that the distortions are mostly likely the result of 'academic Chinese whispers' whereby secondary sources have created an interpretation of Vygotsky that is far removed from what he was actually writing. It will also be argued that, far from being unimportant, Vygotsky's ZPD is the culmination of a long struggle to develop a scientific method in psychology and that the ZPD can best be seen as the 'method of double stimulation' adapted to the teaching of formal academic subjects.

Can there be a final version of Vygotsky, or can there only be 'our Vygotsky' consisting of a myriad of interpretations that cannot be compared to a final version? Can we accommodate an historical Vygotsky or can he only be assimilated into our present schema of things? It would be deemed arrogant for anyone to declare to have the version of Vygotsky that he himself intended, but it does make sense to say that he wrote so as to convey exactly what he meant. It makes sense to say this because, otherwise, all versions of Vygotsky – 'our Vygotsky' – would collapse into a uniform relativism in which each version stands in equal relation to Vygotsky. For example, I could claim that Vygotsky is saying x and someone else could claim that he is saying not- x and neither of us, in the eyes of many, would be right or wrong. As a Marxist he would have believed that he could convey what he wanted to mean (subject to extraneous factors such as the reader's development, or his or her relation to the class struggle, etc.) and that there is a 'final version' that can be used as a yard-stick. It would have been unlikely for Vygotsky to have written purely to stimulate or legitimise our personal worldview: *he wrote so as to convey his ideas.*

'But how can we ever know what Vygotsky had intended?' The short answer is to read his collected works and this will be discussed later in the context of the lack of faithful translations of his two works that people know Vygotsky by.

'Diversity of interpretation should be celebrated – after all, for Vygotsky and his collaborators to have stimulated such diverse contemporary ideas in education can only be a good thing'! Whether or not a diversity of ideas is a good thing depends on those ideas and their implications. The point, however, is that there is a disparity between 'our Vygotsky' and what Vygotsky was writing about:

Fame is a socially constructed entity which functions for the purposes of the constructors, rather than for the designated bearers of that role themselves. A fitting proof of the societal

construction of Vygotsky's stature is the list of ideas that the fascinated public has been persistently overlooking in the discourse about Vygotsky (van der Veer & Valsiner 1994, p.5).

As van der Veer and Valsiner (1993) have noted, the references to the 'genius' of Vygotsky are 'a good means of advertising but perhaps not conducive to an understanding of the content and implications of the ideas of the "genius".' (p.1). This implies the disparity between the historical Vygotsky and our idiosyncratic interpretations of him and there exists much evidence to suggest this. Here is a taste of that disparity. For example, according to Newman & Holzman (1993):

Traditional science - including radical, ecologically valid science - sets up experimental situations that replicate real life and uses them to describe what is, in the Marxian sense, alienated reality. The Vygotskian enterprise, as we see it, is to create zones of proximal development - environments where people can perform life - and in so doing transform alienated reality. The difference could not be greater (p.29).

The authors argue that the laboratory setting is contrary to Vygotsky's perspective because it distorts life-as-lived and does not transform life as a 'revolutionary' activity. However, according to van der Veer & Valsiner (1993), for Vygotsky, the greater the artificial conditions the closer we are to understanding the psychological processes scientifically. Van der Veer & Valsiner (1993) state that:

In his [Vygotsky's] view science was based on the reconstruction and interpretation of indirectly given phenomena, and in this respect, he saw no fundamental differences between the natural and social sciences and the study of history. Referring to Max Planck and Engels, Vygotsky argued that all of these sciences transcend the directly visible by making use of instruments and making inferences about the unknown (p.148).

According to Hedegaard (1998): 'The upper level of the ZPD is normative. In one society, the skill of rowing a kayak around the age of 6 years becomes an expectation for children; in another society, it is riding a bike' (p.119). However, according to Wertsch (1985): 'The kind of instruction Vygotsky had in mind was not concerned with "specialized, technical skills such as typing or bicycle riding, that is, skills that have no essential impact on development" (1934, p. 222), but rather had as its goal "all-round development", such as instruction in formal, academic disciplines, each of which has a sphere "in which the impact of instruction on development is accomplished and fulfilled" (ibid.)' (p.71). Also, for Hedegaard to place the ZPD in terms of kayak rowing would be contrary to Vygotsky's evolutionary view of universal human rationality. According to Wertsch (1996): ' "Primitive thinking" in general differs from modern forms in that the former does not rely on abstract concepts. Such abstract concepts are viewed as emerging at a later historical point. One of the results of this formulation is that what we would today call cross-cultural differences were for Vygotsky and his colleagues "cross-historical" in nature (see Wertsch, 1985)' (p.27).

Crawford (1996), elaborating on the 'transmission model of learning,' swiftly (within an average journal page) advocates a relativist perspective that is wholeheartedly subjectivist:

In general, researchers have interpreted Vygotsky's concept (of the ZPD) in non dialectical terms that fit more closely with the assumptions of a transmission model of learning, in which an expert 'teaches' a novice, that underlie the social organisation of existing institutionalised settings.....(p.43). Vygotsky's view of human learning, and the developmental experience of being and acting in a cultural context, challenges many of the epistemological beliefs and assumptions underlying educational practice. *in particular, it challenges traditional views of mathematics as value free, objective and divorced from everyday personal concerns.....(p.44, emphasis added).*

Eiser (1994: p.109) bluntly articulates these questions in discussing recent scientific views about the limits of objectivity: 'What sense can we make of reality, if not in terms of our own experience? And if our experiences are necessarily personal and selective, how can we make sense of anyone else's, and come anywhere near sharing their reality?' (p.44).

The theorem of Pythagoras, for example, *is* value free and outside most peoples' everyday personal concerns and is objective because its truth is independent of Crawford or the sociocultural community. The point, however, is that the last paragraph reflects more the subjectivism of von Glasersfeld than it does the objectivism of Vygotsky. Many examples of the disparity can be found in Rowlands (2000).

The ideas of a thinker may prompt new ideas that are different to what the thinker intended. However, the difference has to be made explicit, otherwise the thinker would be taken out of context. There is a sense in which someone can be taken out of context. For example, if x states p and y states that x stated not-p then y has taken x out of context.

Now there is nothing wrong in taking someone out of context, provided that this has been made explicit. For example, Marx stated that he turned Hegel 'on his head' and fully acknowledged his ideas for making his own possible – but he never called himself an Hegelian. If we take Vygotsky out of context then we must be clear that that is what we are doing and should not call ourselves Vygotskian for doing so.

There is evidence to suggest that Vygotsky's quest was to transform psychology into a science, and by science he meant a theoretical framework that has the same logical form as Marx's Capital: an axiom that defines the central unit of analysis (commodity value) from which a hierarchy of concepts are all well-defined by this central unit (surplus value, value of labour-power, constant and variable capital, rate of surplus value, rate of profit, etc). After many years and just before his death he identified the central unit of analysis as *emotional experience*:

An emotional experience {perezhivanie} is a unit where, on the one hand, in an indivisible state, the environment is represented, i.e. that which is being experienced - an emotional experience {perezhivanie} is always related to something which is found

outside the person - and on the other hand, what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this... (Vygotsky, 1994, p.342, author's emphasis).

Had he lived then there is every reason to suppose that he would have constructed a framework of concepts that are all well-defined by emotional experience.

Vygotsky was well aware of the logical-form of Capital (see Rowlands, 2000) which is identical to that of Newtonian mechanics: the central unit being force, implicitly well-defined by 3 axioms from which we have a hierarchical system of concepts (for example, the law of conservation of momentum is derived from the 3 laws of motion). Indeed, Capital is the only example of a social science that has the same logical form as mechanics. Vygotsky wanted psychology to be the second. What concepts Vygotsky would have defined by emotional experience is a matter of speculation, but the method by which he would have searched for the appropriate concepts would have involved artificially creating the conditions so as to provoke emotional experience, and to see how emotional experience manifests under these conditions. Vygotsky based his method on Marx's 'Thesis on Feuerbach' (Wertsch, 1985; Rosa & Montero, 1990) which emphasised the point that in order to know the world we have to change it. Vygotsky called his method 'experimental-developmental': "which calls for an experimenter to intervene in some developmental process in order to observe how such intervention changes it. Again the primary motivation for doing this is to observe genetic processes: 'Our method may be called experimental-developmental in the sense that it artificially provokes or creates a process of psychological development' (Vygotsky, 1978, pp61-62)" (Wertsch 1985, p.19, emphasis added). For Vygotsky, an artificial combination of conditions can be created to reveal the action of some *specified* law (e.g the law of cognitive development. See Vygotsky, 1987) in its clearest form (van der Veer & Valsiner 1993), and this is consistent with Marx's 'scientifically based method' of ascending 'from the abstract to the concrete' (see Matthews, 1980) - first the (theoretical) *idea* then the realisation of the idea in practice (experiment) - just as the scientist does not perform an experiment without some theoretical point in mind and that the experiment is structured according to the theory (Chalmers, 1982; Toulmin, 1969).

The intervention in the 'experimental-developmental' method is structured according to the 'ideal' (e.g. according to the nature of the concepts to be acquired or the task to be completed) but 'in accordance' with the response of the subject. For example, based on this method is the principle of 'double stimulation': a problem is set and the child is observed in solving it. Then a ready method is set and the child is observed in applying it. An 'intermediate function', or 'executive instrument', is constructed from the two observations, thus enabling the researcher to mediate between the task and its fulfillment (see Luria, Sakharov, Vygotsky and Luria in *The Vygotsky Reader*, Vygotsky 1994; and 'Experimental Study of Concept Development' in Vygotsky 1987).

With reference to the disparity between *Thought and Language* and *Thinking and Speech*, in which the former is translated in a way that undermines Vygotsky's

elaboration of method, Gillen (2000) elaborates this method as the investigation of cognitive development as it occurs as a process rather than as a static 'snap-shot' of abilities. In this process, consideration is given to the way the experiment influences the subject. The ZPD, I would argue, should best be seen in this light: the ZPD treats cognitive development as a development in process and change rather than as an end-product established as a set of discrete levels. For example, if a child can successfully complete a task unaided, then prior knowledge of the abilities required to complete the task would merely enable us to say what abilities the child has - 'merely' because we would be looking at the child's abilities that have already matured in the child - we would be looking at a 'snap-shot' of the maturation process as an end-product. To understand the maturation process *as a process* then we would have to facilitate the child's completion of a task that the child cannot do unaided. How a child responds to the mediation in completing a task enables us to *explain* the abilities of the child as they mature, rather than simply *describe* the abilities that have already developed. (Rowlands, 2000).

Of course, viewing the ZPD in the light of method is still speculation. Gillen (2000) argues that Vygotsky did not regard the ZPD as either original or important and that, contrary to popular usage, he only discussed the ZPD in terms of learning assessment and pretence play. She cites evidence of people almost having to feel obliged to mention the ZPD as standard, but that may have more to do with legitimisation of current ideas, built upon layers and layers of secondary sources (see Rowlands, 2000) independent of anything Vygotsky was trying to say.

Gillen argues that the translations of *Thought and Language* (both the 1962 edition and the 1986 edition) and *Mind in Society* are influenced by the ideologies of the translators, influencing the way Vygotsky's theories have been received. The way a work has been translated has an effect on the way that work is publicly interpreted. In education, the prominence of Vygotsky is partly due to poor translation which has led to what Gillen calls a 'facilitation of false coherence', that is, the 'temptation of finding an overly simple sense of coherence in Vygotsky's work' with the ZPD in particular (p.185). However, the quality of translation is not a sufficient cause for the popularity of the work – there has to be other factors involved in the creation of what could be referred to as the 'Vygotsky Phenomenon'. Gillen gives two: Vygotsky has been used as an authority in support of current trends because the political and historical distance of Vygotsky has made it convenient to divorce his ideas from the context and debates that gave rise to those ideas and, secondly, Vygotsky appeals to those who have a concern with social/moral/political issues and education. She points out that most educators only know Vygotsky through *Thought and Language* and *Mind in Society* which have been badly translated and points to the remedy: a reading of his collected works (vols. 1 – 5).

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