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Veer, R. van der

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Vygotsky and Piaget: A Collective Monologue

René van der Veer

University of Leiden, The Netherlands

Key Words

Dialogue · Egocentric speech · History · Piaget · Vygotsky

Abstract

This article presents a first and incomplete chronology of publications by Piaget and Vygotsky in which they criticize each other's ideas. It is shown that a genuine critical dialogue between the two failed to develop because Piaget did not reply to Vygotsky's lengthy criticisms at first. Several reasons for Piaget's initial reticence are considered.

It is not without sadness that an author discovers, twenty-five years after its publication, the work of a fellow author who has died in the meantime, when that work contains so many points of immediate interest to him which should have been discussed personally and in detail. Although my friend A. Luria kept me up to date concerning Vygotsky's sympathetic and yet critical position with respect to my own work, I was never able to read his writings nor to meet him, and in reading his work today, I regret this profoundly, for we could have come to an understanding on a number of issues [Piaget, 1962/1995, p. 325].

These were the words Piaget used to begin his comments on Vygotsky's [1962] critical remarks concerning Piaget's early ideas about childhood egocentrism. Piaget went on to discuss Vygotsky's critique in great detail, but rather than following this discussion (which has been analyzed a number of times) I would like to reflect on the factors that prevented a fruitful dialogue between Piaget and Vygotsky.

It is probably no exaggeration to say that since the 1920s, the agenda and central debates of developmental psychology have been dominated by the ideas of Piaget. His ideas met with both praise and criticism [Parrat-Day, 1993a; 1993b], but leading researchers in the field, such as William and Clara Stern, Charlotte and Karl Bühler, Henri Wallon, and Pierre Janet, immediately recognized Piaget as a powerful thinker whose ideas deserved careful attention. Piaget's first five books, concerning children's thought and language [1923], judgment and reasoning [1924], conception of the world [1926], conception of physical causality [1927], and developing sense of morality [1932a] changed

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René van der Veer
University of Leiden
Department of Education
PO Box 9555
NL-2300 RB Leiden (The Netherlands)

the landscape of psychology. Their wealth of detail and subtle argument continue to fascinate us today.

Among the many people who followed the work of Piaget with great interest was the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, then virtually unknown. Despite his critical attitude toward many of Piaget's central ideas, Vygotsky realized that Piaget was one of the most important voices in international psychology, and Piaget became the author most frequently referred to in his subsequent work [Van der Veer, 1995]. In the 1920s, Vygotsky and his colleagues replicated virtually all of Piaget's investigations. Around 1930, Vygotsky began to organize the translation of Piaget's first two books into Russian [Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991].

If we consider Piaget's first books as overtures in an attempted dialogue, the paper Vygotsky and Luria presented at the Ninth International Congress of Psychology at New Haven in September 1929 may be considered their first reply to Piaget. Vygotsky and Luria [1930] argued that the function and fate of what Piaget termed 'egocentric speech' and the psychological mechanisms responsible for its evolution were still unclear. As to the *function* of egocentric speech, they found that this form of behavior appeared very frequently when the child was confronted with a difficult situation. They claimed that the verbal reactions were not merely accompaniment to the child's main activity, but were directed toward solution of the problem. The child tries first to solve the problem verbally, in order to organize subsequent activity. Thus, egocentric speech has a specific organizing function. As to the *fate* of egocentric speech, Vygotsky and Luria [1930] claimed that egocentric speech is replaced by 'specific pauses which have an intellectual character and are filled by internal speech. The qualitative analysis of the exteriorized internal speech shows its resemblance to egocentric speech with respect to its structure, function, and genesis' [p. 465]. The authors concluded, therefore, that egocentric speech becomes internal in its evolution, and they suggested replacing the sequence of external speech to internal speech by a sequence of external speech to egocentric speech to internal speech.

Piaget, who was present in New Haven when Luria presented the paper co-authored with Vygotsky, did not reply to this criticism and to the proposed mediation model. One reason may have been that his own thinking had moved into the field of moral thinking, the topic on which he himself presented a paper in New Haven and about which he would subsequently publish his great book [Piaget, 1930a, 1932a]. It is likely, however, that Luria and Piaget met at this conference, exchanged their views about the topic of egocentric speech, and agreed to start corresponding. That Piaget knew of Vygotsky's and Luria's findings is apparent from his preface to the second French edition of *The Language and Thought of the Child* [Piaget, 1930b], where he mentions that Luria in replicating his study arrived at different results. It is likely that Luria also told Piaget about the Russian plans to translate several of his books.

We know for sure that some time later Piaget gave permission to translate his first two books into Russian and that he knew about the replications of his research that his Russian colleagues were busy conducting. This fact we may also infer from Piaget's words in his preface written especially for the Russian edition:

It is a great pleasure to me to have the possibility, given by this preface, to express publicly my gratefulness to the Soviet psychologists for their willingness to undertake the translation into the Russian language of my work and especially for the series of investigations they arranged which have as

their goal to complement and correct the work we managed to do in Geneva [...] Nothing can be more useful for science than this rapprochement of the investigations of Russian psychologists with the work done in other countries [Piaget, 1932b, pp. 55–56].

The fact that Piaget wrote a preface to the Russian reader proves that he knew of the existence of the Russian translation, and his mention of the research plans of his Russian colleagues makes it likely that he was kept informed of the research conducted by Vygotsky and his associates, probably through Luria. It is quite likely, of course, that Piaget received a copy of the translation. If so, this would be very interesting, because this translation also contained the lengthy introductory essay written by Vygotsky [1932] in which he criticized Piaget's interpretation of his findings and his theoretical position at large. In fact, it was this introductory essay that would subsequently be republished as chapter 2 of *Thought and Language* [1934; 1962] and to which Piaget eventually reacted in 1962. We may regard Vygotsky's introductory essay as the second and exhaustive reply to the views espoused by the early Piaget.

By 1932, then, Piaget knew about Vygotsky's criticism both through the New Haven paper and through interaction and correspondence with Luria. He also had at his disposal a long Russian text addressing his views written by the same Lev Vygotsky whom Luria had mentioned so often. He may, in addition, have had one or more of the papers written in English that Luria began to distribute among his international colleagues in the late 1920s. One of them was called 'Matters and Facts of the Genesis of the Child's Writing' and is referred to [p. 416] in the second edition of Werner's [1933] *Einführung in die Entwicklungspsychologie (Comparative psychology of mental development)*. The article was republished much later [Luria, 1978], a fact allowing us to see that it gave an excellent account of Vygotsky's and Luria's ideas about the origin of mediation.

Yet, at this time Piaget did not reply to his Soviet critics either, possibly because he did not deem it necessary – judging from what he had heard from Luria – to have Vygotsky's introductory essay translated and answered. Piaget may have had other interests now. It was only in 1959 that Piaget first publicly addressed Vygotsky's and Luria's criticism. In the new chapter added to the third edition of *The Language and Thought of the Child* he briefly mentioned some of the criticisms of his early work. Piaget [1959] remarked:

True, A. Luria, in his writings published in Russian, compares egocentric speech in the child to the inner language of the adult. This comparison is excellent from the functional point of view or, as Luria tells us, using Dewey's language, from the 'instrumental' point of view. But it does not seem to us to do away with differences of structure [p. 263].

This lapidary remark hardly did justice to the research of Vygotsky and Luria, who in their Russian writings had paid ample attention to both the structure and function of egocentric and inner speech [Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991]. One year later Piaget simply stated what seems to be another point of critique. He now said that Vygotsky and Luria's idea about the child's egocentric speech as the starting point for the adult's internal language 'seems quite correct but does not explain primitive social non-coordination' [Piaget, 1960/1995, p. 308]. A genuine and elaborate answer to Vygotsky's criticism thus had to wait until 1962, when Piaget finally replied to the arguments that in some form he had already known for approximately 30 years. In that answer, he partly agreed with Vygotsky's arguments and partly claimed that Vygotsky's criticism was based on a misreading of his work.

We may now attempt to draw some conclusions from this still very incomplete account of the relationship between Piaget and Vygotsky. One thing appears sure: A genuine dialogue between Piaget and his Russian critics might have been attempted some 30 years before it actually ensued, and the dialogue did not develop because Piaget did not respond to his Russian critics. To explain this historical fact we can invoke various hypotheses, five of which I briefly consider:

(1) *Language barrier.* A language problem definitely existed, as Piaget did not read Russian. (Vygotsky and his colleagues read French.) However, Piaget had the New Haven paper by Vygotsky and Luria as well as possibly some other papers in English by Luria, and above all he was in regular contact with Luria (to the extent that he called him his 'friend' in his 1962 reply). Moreover, if he had really wished to do so, Piaget would certainly have been capable of finding translators for Vygotsky's [1932] introductory essay, perhaps even among his close collaborators of whom some were of Polish or Russian descent (such as Szeminska, Svetlova, and Katzaroff-Eynard). We may conclude, then, that the language barrier existed but played no decisive role.

(2) *Lack of knowledge.* There can have been no lack of knowledge of the Russian ideas on Piaget's side. As I have demonstrated, Piaget was kept informed of the research of his Russian colleagues through various channels.

(3) *Quality of criticism.* Piaget did not refrain from responding to the Russian criticism because he thought it lacked quality. On the contrary, in his reply to Vygotsky [Piaget, 1962; 1962/1995] he lists their points of convergence and states that he greatly respects Vygotsky's position.

(4) *Ideology.* Ideology played no decisive role for Piaget, who was a sympathetic but critical follower of some form of socialism [Vidal, 1994] and who, perhaps naively, believed that the Russian investigations would complement his own [Piaget, 1932b]. It played a much more important role for his Russian colleagues, who were under increasing pressure to criticize all non-marxist psychological approaches. But, unlike Joravsky [1989], I believe that Vygotsky's [1932] criticism of Piaget's view was still relatively free of ideological bias. Ideology thus seems to have played no overriding role.

(5) *Personal style.* Piaget said more than once [Bringuier, 1977, p. 37] that researchers need colleagues who contradict them and that science is a collective enterprise. Yet one cannot help but think that for him the role of these scientific interlocutors was equivalent to the role of the social environment in Piaget's conception of cognitive development: They are absolutely indispensable, they fuel the scientific debate, they can hinder or facilitate the development of a system of thought, but in the end it is not they who determine the direction and form of a scientific theory but the laws of logic applied to scientific facts and ideas. Such a research philosophy allowed Piaget to devise experiments and to interpret their results, and to devise new experiments on the basis of this interpretation, without paying much attention to the comments or ideas of other researchers. We may add that Piaget himself admitted that he deliberately ignored much of the contemporary psychological literature [Bringuier, 1977, pp. 83-84] and mainly pursued his own course of ideas. This personal strategy enabled Piaget to develop a system of thought that is both profoundly original and relatively isolated in modern developmental psychology. From such a viewpoint, it simply is not worthwhile to respond to critics as long as oneself and the members of one's own research group (or research paradigm) are content with the progress of the research undertaken. I believe, then, that the main reason for Piaget's silence must be sought in his personal style of doing science.

tific research. He did not reply to the criticism of his virtually unknown Russian critic, or for that matter, to the criticism of much better-known colleagues, because he was stubbornly following his own path in psychology, paying little attention to what was happening outside his own reference group.

Finally, we may remark that an early reply by Piaget would not have saved him from the fate that eventually befell virtually all foreign authors in the Soviet Union. Somewhere in the 1930s, Piaget came to be seen as one of the many decadent bourgeois psychologists whose work needed to be ignored. As recently as 1949, his work was branded as 'a militant attempt to depict child intelligence in an absolutely distorted form' [Kozulin, 1984, pp. 25, 28]. Thus even if both interlocutors had intended an open and continuous dialogue, they would not have succeeded because of the political events in the Soviet Union. Yet an early reply by Piaget would have yielded, perhaps, an interesting confrontation of two theories, one that might have stimulated new investigations. Now we are left with the image of two brilliant scientists, separated by barriers of language, ideology, and personal style, locked in their own frames of reference, perhaps, and participating in a form of 'collective monologue' [Piaget, 1923].

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