

Abstract Nicolopoulou and Weintraub (1996) raised doubts about the extent of the relevance of the Humboldtian tradition for Vygotsky's concept of culture, and his semiotic approach in general. However, these doubts are unfounded—Vygotsky was in direct contact with the 19th-century German traditions of philosophical analyses of language, as well as with their Russian elaborations. Furthermore, Vygotsky borrowed theoretical notions from two distinct traditions of thought—often contrasted (by Soviet sources) as 'idealist' and 'materialist.' Defying the demand to make such contrasts mutually exclusive, Vygotsky tried to blend productive moments from each of them into his approach. He was not a 'cultural relativist' in the sense of present-day North American social discourse. It is suggested that the concepts of development and relativism are in need of further elaboration, in ways that allow recognition of local progress while avoiding global claims where the bases of comparison are not made explicit.

Key Words cultural relativism, development, language, progress

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On Some Historical Roots and Present-day Doubts: A Reply to Nicolopoulou and Weintraub (1996)

The commentary by Nicolopoulou and Weintraub (1996) and my present reply demonstrate Humboldt's and Potebnina's contention that we understand ourselves only after we have tested our words on the social other. Perhaps the more gloomy conclusion is that in the end what is said never coincides with what is comprehended, and the understanding that there is an inescapable gap between speaker and listener also holds true for written texts (Kozulin, 1990, pp. 19–20; Van der Veer, 1996).

It would seem that the writing (and rewriting) process, with its constant mental dialogue with imaginary readers who need to understand and agree with the text, would guarantee that the writer fully understands (the implications of) his or her own text. What is

more, unlike the spoken word, a written text is available as an object for study and understanding by its author. And yet the creative reader gives his or her own original twist to the ideas embodied in a text and thereby derives implications and corollaries unexpected and/or unintended by its author. Written texts differ fundamentally from oral speech but do not escape Humboldt's (1826/1971) laws.

Nicolopoulou and Weintraub display an exquisite understanding of this troublesome but creative facet of human discourse. Their text is full of expressions which show their deep understanding of the pitfalls and subtleties of human dialogue. It is clear, for example, that their use of expressions such as 'Van der Veer suggests, or so it appears' and 'without quite saying so directly, Van der Veer seems to imply' (p. 275; emphasis added) is not meant to suggest that my own original text was fundamentally ambiguous but demonstrates an awareness of the fact that each statement (whether scientific or otherwise) is in need of interpretation and is changed in that process of interpretation. Their whole comment is thus fundamentally in the spirit of the ideas discussed in my paper.

In my turn, I would like to add to the creative confusion by discussing several of the issues they have raised. First, Nicolopoulou and Weintraub state that I have not yet established that 'Potebnya's work ... had a decisive influence on the formation of the cultural dimension in Vygotsky's theory' (p. 275; emphasis added). Here, of course, I would like to know what they mean by 'decisive' and what evidence would convince them that any influence is 'decisive'. But I do not want to quibble about words. My aim was to show that the Humboldt-Potebnya-Shpet tradition was important for Vygotsky's concept of culture. Let me briefly recall the evidence:

1. Vygotsky read Potebnya in his youth and studied Shpet's ideas in his student years, that is, before he started his career as a psychologist.
2. Vygotsky mentioned and discussed Potebnya's (and to a lesser extent) Shpet's ideas throughout his career. Thus, we find abundant references in his very first books (e.g. Vygotsky, 1925/1971) published when he entered the academic world, but his interest in this tradition did not diminish and even in the very last thing he wrote, that is, the last chapter of *Thinking and Speech* (Vygotsky, 1934/1987), he referred to Humboldt and Potebnya in addressing several semiotic themes.
3. In Vygotsky's work we find a number of themes and concepts (listed in Van der Veer, 1996) which were already present in the work of Humboldt Potebnya and Shpet, and which, I think, we do not meet in that form in the work of other theorists (such as Durkheim). These themes and concepts were of paramount ('decisive?') importance for Vygotsky's language-based concept of culture.

Taken together this evidence doesn't *prove* that Vygotsky adopted several of Humboldt's central tenets. After all, he might claim—when challenged (just like Piaget used to do in similar cases)—that he independently arrived at these ideas and just referred to Humboldt and Potebnya because they happened to have stated these same ideas somewhat earlier, hence my somewhat cautious formulations in my paper (Van der Veer, 1996). But the whole story at least suggests that the Humboldt–Potebnya–Shpet tradition was important for Vygotsky's whole project, and for his concept of culture. Other researchers, such as Kozulin (1990), Wertsch (1985) and Yaroshevsky (1989, 1993), have also emphasized the importance of Potebnya's influence, and all I did was to spell out this influence in somewhat more detail. In doing so I fully concurred with Wertsch (1985), who claimed that 'no other aspect of Vygotsky's work has been as consistently ignored or misinterpreted by psychologists as his semiotic analysis and the intellectual forces that gave rise to it' (p. 81).

The second issue raised by Nicolopoulou and Weintraub is that of the

... two theoretical/ideological alternatives available to Vygotsky. On the one hand, there is a 'materialist' and technologically reductionist approach to culture, linked to a hierarchical and unilinear picture of social and cultural 'progress', represented by Soviet marxism and 'progressive' thought more generally. On the other hand, there is an 'idealist' and non-reductionist understanding of culture and its formative role, linked to a recognition of cultural diversity, represented by the Humboldtian tradition. (p. 278)

Nicolopoulou and Weintraub continue by stating that 'this dualistic picture is a little too neat' (p. 278). I couldn't agree more! I never claimed that Vygotsky had 'two theoretical/ideological alternatives available' from which he had to choose the right one. Nor did I ever believe that the notion of progress is exclusively tied to Marxist thought. What I do believe is that Vygotsky attempted to integrate different strands of thought, the one consisting of ideas originally developed by Humboldt, the other developed by Marxist thinkers. It is a historical fact that this fusion was seen by Vygotsky's contemporaries (e.g. Leont'ev's criticism) as lacking a material basis, that is, Vygotsky's contemporaries still increasingly felt (under the pressure of the prevailing ideology) that Vygotsky was at bottom an 'idealist' (Humboldtian) thinker.

I also believe (but here I may be totally wrong) that historically it were the leftist, Marxist thinkers who put such notions as 'progress' and 'emancipation' again on the agenda of the social sciences in the

Soviet Union. What this means is that for Vygotsky, historically, the Humboldtian tradition yielded important semiotic ideas whereas the Marxist, 'progressivist' tradition in the Soviet Union (which became prevalent somewhat later) emphasized such notions as tool-use, materialism, and technological progress.

This brings me to the final issue raised by Nicolopoulou and Weintraub, that of individual or cultural development and relativism. Here they raise an issue which I believe to be of fundamental importance for psychology. I am not sure though that Nicolopoulou and Weintraub are right in claiming that 'a thoroughgoing relativism ... is incompatible with any serious conception of development' (p. 282), because here so much depends upon the exact definition of these terms and concepts.

If we define, for example, developmental or genetic psychology as the discipline that studies mental development over the whole life-span, and even if we—as is usual—decide not to view development beyond adolescence, in both cases we immediately realize that development involves both losses and gains. Many of the losses (or disappearances) are due to the enculturation process in a specific society: children learn to hide certain feelings, to express others in conventional forms and the emotions themselves are shaped and transformed in this process. As a result the emotional 'household' of adults differs from that of children and from that of adults living in another culture. Interestingly enough, under some circumstances (e.g. in psychotherapy) this highly conventionalized emotional behaviour is felt to be inadequate and persons can be seen as being insufficiently 'genuine' or 'real'. They are then told to shake off the conventional forms and to express their 'real' feelings more freely or even without restraint. Such a procedure (which is equally culturally constrained) presupposes that important mental potentialities were lost during development. Artists (e.g. painters, sculptors), likewise, often feel captured in the conventional language of symbols and seek to return to the allegedly unconventional ways in which children (or 'natives') express themselves. Of course, all groups find to their dismay that it is a very difficult if not impossible task to undo the enculturation process. We can no more 'unlearn' what has been learned, 'unsee' what has been seen, than we can undo what has been done. Many thinkers have realized this, hence the romantic pictures of childhood as a paradise which is irretrievably lost, and so on.

Other losses are due to our organic development: most adults can no longer suck their big toes, few adults can still be physically active for more than an hour per day, few elderly people still ride a bike, and so

on. The well-known graphs of slowly declining intelligence in old age (if they are more than an artifact) may partially reflect such organic development (decline).

So development, whether seen as continuing throughout life or restricted to its first part, entails the appearance (gain) and disappearance (loss) of certain abilities. The fact that some abilities are lost during development rules out some notions of development. We can no longer claim, for instance, that in stage B we can do everything we could do in the previous stage A *plus* something new; we would have to admit that in stage B we can no longer perform certain actions which we still could do in stage A. But perhaps we can still draw a balance and claim that on the whole adults are somehow 'better', 'more capable', and so on, than children? Or doesn't such a global statement make any sense? The presupposition would need to be, of course, that all capacities/abilities are of equal (or at any rate quantifiable) value and can be added up in a meaningful way. One would have to say something like: 'OK, I can no longer make interesting drawings, I can no longer play, I can no longer do physical exercises for more than 15 minutes, I can no longer cry in public, but I can do arithmetic and I did learn to speak passable French, so all in all I have made some global progress.' But here it becomes obvious that such global statements are very problematic, that we cannot meaningfully balance the losses against the gains as we lack a common standard or unit to compare them. It may also be that such global statements reflect a western-type form of 'ageism' in which both children and elderly people are seen as inferior variants of the adult person who is typically doing and publishing the scientific research.

Thus, it would seem that development (i.e. we can do other/more things than previously, but we lost some of our previous abilities) doesn't necessarily involve 'progress' (i.e. we can do something faster/more accurately, etc., than previously; we can do what we could do previously *plus* something more) and may be compatible with what I would call RELATIVISM A. RELATIVISM A entails the position that we can never state that any new stage in development is *on the whole* better than any (previous) stage, as there are no global standards and as summation of developments in different developmental domains (or lines of development) is impossible. I would object, however, to accepting what I call RELATIVISM B, by which I mean a form of relativism which says *that we have no grounds at all* for saying that something is better than anything else.

Surely one can make comparative statements about specific processes provided we specify our standards for comparison. Thus, to give a trivial example, we might say that cars are 'better' than bikes if

our goal is to reach some far-away place as fast as possible, whereas we might claim that bikes are 'better' than cars if our goal is to diminish environmental pollution. I think that for both ontogenetic development and cultural development (comparing cultures of different societies) we can accept RELATIVISM A (and thus deny value of making statements about global progress, while recognizing local contrasts) and reject RELATIVISM B (in its denial of any comparisons). Thus it is possible to accept that different stages or cultures have specific advantages and disadvantages, without becoming involved in general claims about progress, regress or stagnation in general.

The above remarks were meant to reflect on our use of such notions as development and relativism in the domain of ontogenetic (and to some extent cultural) development. But, clearly, similar problems exist in other domains as well. Some biologists have claimed, for example, that there is no sense in which we can argue that global progress has been made during biological evolution while others subscribe to some form of the Great Chain of Being (see elaborate discussions in Dennett, 1995). What this means is that I agree with Nicolopoulou and Weintraub that theoretical work in this area is extremely important for (developmental) psychology in general and for our assessment of the specific theories advanced by Piaget, Kohlberg, Vygotsky and others.

Finally, let me thank Nicolopoulou and Weintraub for their constructive criticisms which helped me to clarify my own thinking and to realize what I had originally written. It is by means of such criticisms that science can develop (make progress?), or as the German saying goes: 'Sour grapes make sweet wine.' (Saure Weintrauben machen süsse Wein.)

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Biography

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