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Abstract It is shown that Vygotsky's concept of culture was co-determined by two fundamental traditions in the human sciences. The first tradition was initiated by Humboldt and exerted a powerful influence on Vygotsky's thinking through the works of Potebnya and Shpet. Vygotsky's thinking about linguistic mediation was to a large extent determined by this tradition. The second tradition was that of Marxism and progressive thought and influenced Vygotsky's thinking about such notions as tool-use and social and cultural progress. The way in which Vygotsky combined these different perspectives in his concept of culture is described. It is suggested that this concept of culture was powerful but also limited and biased.

Key Words culture, history of psychology, human development, mind

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The Concept of Culture in Vygotsky's Thinking

According to ancient tradition tool and language belong to what is most human in man. (Bühler, 1934, p. iii)

No experience in my exotic wanderings among the Trobrianders and the Chagga, among the Masai and the Pueblo, has ever matched the shock I received on my first visit to New York, when I arrived there ten years ago on a fine spring evening, and saw the city in its strangeness and exotic beauty. The enormous yet elegant monsters blinking at me through their thousand starry eyes, breathing white steam, giants which crowded in fantastic clusters over the smooth waters of the river, stood before me: the living, dominating realities of this new culture. During my first few days in New York I could not shake off the feeling that the strange 'genius' of this most modern civilization had become incarnate in the skyscraper, the subway, and the ferry boat. Large insects in the shape of automobiles crept along the gutter called street or avenue, subordinate but important. Finally, as a fairly insignificant and secondary by-product of the enormous mechanical reality, there appeared the microscopic bacteria called Man, sneaking in and out of subway, skyscraper, or automobile, performing some useful service to their masters, but otherwise rather insignificant. Modern civilization is a gigantic hypertrophy of material objects, and contemporary man will still have to

fight his battle in order to reassert his dominance over the Thing. (Malinowski, 1937, pp. 145–146)

To discuss the concept of culture in Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory is to go back in time, to examine his views and to try to trace the roots of his ideas in those of his contemporaries and predecessors. It will be seen, I believe, that although the *man* Vygotsky was a person of immense erudition, an expert in religious, philosophical and psychological thought, a lecturer who could speak fluently about musical composers and Einstein's theory of relativity, a connoisseur of literature, drama, poetry and an amateur poet himself, the *researcher* Vygotsky employed a rather limited concept of culture in his theoretical thinking.

Elsewhere (e.g. Van der Veer, 1991; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) it has been pointed out that Vygotsky's thinking about culture and its part in mental functioning was influenced by his reading of important German theorists such as Werner (1925), Krueger (1915) and Thurnwald (1922, cf. 1938) and by the writings of the French sociological school of Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl and their followers in psychology, such as Janet and Blondel. Little attention has been given to another tradition in psychology which finally led to Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* (Jahoda, 1982, 1995; Valsiner & Van der Veer, 1995). Meanwhile it can be argued that this tradition which starts with Humboldt and leads through Steinthal and Lazarus to Wundt and others formed quite an important background for Vygotsky's whole project. It may be assumed that Vygotsky digested this tradition primarily through the writings of two important Russian scholars with whose work he was thoroughly acquainted. In what follows I give a brief account of some of the relevant ideas of these thinkers. I then briefly comment upon several other notions that Vygotsky used in his cultural-historical theory and, finally, draw some conclusions as to the concept of culture implicit in this theory.

From Humboldt to Potebnya

It is well known (cf. Levitin, 1990) that one of the first scholars who prompted Vygotsky's interest in psychology was Aleksandr Potebnya (1835–91), a linguist who worked in the tradition of Humboldt (Salus, 1969) and who saw the study of language as being of the utmost importance for all psychology. In Potebnya's view, language or articulate speech not only serves as a means of communication but shapes our whole way of thinking (Budagov, 1988). In his view the language we are born into is by far the most important part of our cultural and

biological heritage. Without verbal concepts no science would be possible, and without words as internal means humans would have remained savages, because words are 'the first and fundamental means of progress' (Potebnya, 1926/1989a, pp. 181, 197-198).

One of Potebnya's main themes was that of the relation between words or concepts, on the one hand, and ideas or thoughts, on the other hand. Throughout his book, *Thought and Language*, Potebnya (e.g. 1926/1989a, pp. 28, 39, 148, 156, 169) argued in the tradition of Humboldt that ideas are not simply *expressed* in words (as if ideas lie ready-made in our mind and only need to be stated aloud) but are born together with the word. Language or speech adds something to the idea; it is an instrument that creates or shapes our ideas, or, as Humboldt expressed it, it is the creative organ of thought ('das bildende Organ des Gedanken'). This is not to say that forms of non-verbal thought do not exist. Potebnya (1926/1989a, pp. 50-51) pointed out that pre-verbal children can solve certain practical problems and that artists may use forms of non-verbal thought. But it does mean that speech, the articulation of ideas, changes these ideas in certain fundamental ways.

Potebnya argued that what language does is to objectify one's private ideas. This has several interconnected repercussions. First, by stating one's ideas in the language of some culture, they become accessible to the whole community and thereby stop being one's private ideas. Or, in Potebnya's (1926/1989a, p. 166) own words, the idea stated in words 'stops being the property of the speaker himself and gets the possibility of a life independent of its creator'. In modern terms, this is to say that the formulation of an idea allows it to leave the realm of private thought and makes it possible for the idea to enter Popper's World 3, that is, the world of ideas in the objective sense, the world of theories (Popper, 1972), where it can be criticized, changed, etc.

Second, if I wish to communicate my ideas I must necessarily make use of the existing words of the language of my own or some other culture. As Potebnya (1926/1989a, p. 42) said, after Humboldt, we are confined within the boundaries of our language and we can only step out of it by stepping into another language. This means that we are forced to use the heritage of the past embodied in the language of our culture (p. 128). Words necessarily generalize, that is, they refer to a whole class of similar events or objects (pp. 138-139), and by describing my ideas in existing words I necessarily make my private ideas comparable to the existing ideas, events, etc., of that culture and thereby objectify them (cf. Bühler, 1934; Stern & Stern, 1928). In other

words, to speak, as Humboldt said, is to connect one's own special ideas with the existing ideas ('Sprechen heißt sein besonderes Denken an das Allgemeine anknüpfen'; Potebnya, 1926/1989a, p. 149).

Third, once I have given form to my idea in words it becomes an object for myself as words are audible and in this way are returned to the speaker (Potebnya, 1926/1989a, pp. 40, 133). By stating a certain idea to a listener I not only communicate that idea to the listener but make it audible for myself and thereby influence myself. In this connection Potebnya pointed out a phenomenon well known to teachers, that is, that it is sometimes only in explaining a topic to the students that the teacher realizes that he does not understand the topic himself. The reason is that in explaining something to another I also explain it to myself (*docendo discimus*). Again, this was a theme first developed by Humboldt, who had argued (Potebnya, 1926/1989a, pp. 40, 95, 131) that man understands himself only when he has tried the intelligibility of his words upon the social other. This led Potebnya (p. 127) to state that the word is as much a means to understand the other as it is a means to understand oneself. Articulate speech or language, then, is a means to understand oneself due to the fact that it is returned to its source as an object (p. 133).

In Potebnya's conception, language is essential to objectify our ideas and to make scientific discourse possible. It is also indispensable for most of the thinking of the individual person, as most thinking is dependent upon concepts which are tied to language. Potebnya (pp. 40, 146) claimed that language is essential for the thinking of the individual person 'even if he is completely isolated'. The articulate nature (*drobnot'*) of language, the discursivity of thought prescribed by language, create a structured world whose boundaries we cannot transcend once we have stepped into it (p. 152). But this structured world comes about in the constant dialogue between speaker and listener who never fully understand each other because no one thinks of exactly the same thing when using a certain word (p. 166), a theme which must have appealed to Bakhtin (see Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 65). As soon as the words are uttered they become the shared property of speaker and listener ('the speaker, feeling that the word belongs to him, at the same time assumes that the word and the idea do not form his exclusive, personal possession, because what the listener understands belongs, consequently, also to the latter', Potebnya, 1926/1989a, p. 156). Fortunately, shared understanding is possible because both speaker and listener refer to certain objects existing 'out there' (pp. 45, 124).

These are interesting ideas which deserve a more complete descrip-

tion and analysis than can be given in the context of this paper. But even a superficial listing of several of Potebnya's key ideas makes it abundantly clear that he must have been read by Vygotsky with more than usual interest. Indeed, the whole spirit of Potebnya's (1910/1989b, 1926/1989a) writings (which were filled with psychological examples), his central ideas and many specific remarks are surprisingly similar to ideas we have met in Vygotsky's work. I will mention but a few of them.

(1) The relationship between speech and thinking is, of course, one of the few central themes in Vygotsky's whole body of writings (cf. the different papers gathered in *Thought and Language*, 1934/1962). It is quite clear that Vygotsky shared Potebnya's general view that language or speech shapes our mental processes in fundamental ways. With Potebnya he was inclined to regard the linguistic tools we inherit from our culture as being of the utmost importance, and like Potebnya he regarded the word as a tool of progress without which no progress and no civilized life would be possible.

(2) More specifically, Vygotsky investigated the different roots of discursive thinking. He adopted Potebnya's view that thought and speech are in principle separable and that non-verbal forms of thought can be found. To Potebnya's ontogenetic example (pre-verbal thought in infants) he added phylogenetic evidence (the practical intelligence of Köhler's [1921] chimpanzees seemed to suggest that the common ancestors of ape and human had rudimentary intelligence without speech). Vygotsky (1929a) also added the argument that there is something like pre-intellectual speech (the vocalizing of infants) and concluded that thinking and speech have different genetic roots. The merging of practical thinking with speech leads to verbal, discursive thinking, which is a fundamentally new phenomenon. In this connection, Vygotsky many times approvingly quoted Potebnya's statement that ideas are not expressed but born in language.

(3) Vygotsky repeatedly argued that by using concepts we not only communicate with others (*obshchenie*) but also generalize (*obobshchenie*). A substantial part of his research was dedicated to the investigation of concept formation in children and in this connection he showed that at different age levels the words children use mean different things but that genuine communication is fortunately possible because of the joint reference class. He argued that one of the fundamental advantages of the use of academic concepts is that they form part of a system of interconnected concepts which allows the subject to link up with existing knowledge and to draw conclusions based upon this system.

(4) Finally, Vygotsky explicitly and repeatedly dealt with the fact

that words are 'reversible stimuli', that is, they are heard by the speaker him- or herself. In 'Consciousness as a Problem for the Psychology of Behavior' (Vygotsky, 1925/1996), for example, he dealt with this issue in reflexological terms and stated that words are reversible reflexes which lie at the basis of consciousness. The uttered word (a reflex or response) is returned to the speaker (as a stimulus) for further processing (conscious reflection). In this connection, Vygotsky argued that in deaf-mutes vocal speech remains unconscious and non-social as the 'reversibility of the speech reflex is paralyzed by the absence of hearing'. More generally, he defended the view that we are conscious of ourselves 'only to the extent that we are others to ourselves, i.e., to the extent that we can again perceive our own reflexes as stimuli'. It is a view that comes close to some of the ideas of Royce, Baldwin, Mead and (through Baldwin) Janet and that is in the spirit of Humboldt's famous antinomies: is only by operating upon the social other (by speaking) and by becoming a social other to some extent (through the use of accepted terminology etc.) that we can become our own conscious selves (through reflection upon our own utterances, the effects they produced, etc.).

These few remarks make it quite clear that Vygotsky was probably directly inspired by Potebnya (cf. Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) and that he at any rate must have read Potebnya with great enthusiasm. The common general themes I have pointed out (and many more minor similarities could be given) allow one to conclude that Vygotsky can be firmly placed in the tradition of Potebnya and (to the extent that Potebnya was 'merely' elaborating and extending Humboldt's ideas) Wilhelm von Humboldt.

Shpet's Semiotic Approach

The possible influence of another Humboldtian scholar, Gustav Shpet (1879-1937), on Vygotsky's thinking also remains largely unanalysed (cf. Zinchenko & Morgunov, 1994). We know (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) that Vygotsky as a student followed a course given by Shpet on the 'inner form' of the word (a topic adopted from Humboldt that Potebnya also dealt with), and we may assume that he kept following Shpet's theorizing with some interest. Part of Shpet's thinking resulted in a book which must have been highly relevant for Vygotsky's own endeavour, Shpet's (1927/1989) *Introduction to Ethnic Psychology*.

Shpet's book was an elaborate critique of Lazarus's and Steinthal's views of what they called *Völkerpsychologie*. Shpet examined what the topic of such a science might be, what its principal views were, and

how it was related to kindred disciplines such as ethnology and psychology. He was critical of Lazarus's and Steintal's attempts (see Jahoda, 1995) to delineate the area of ethnic psychology or ethnopsychology (Shpet's translation of *Völkerpsychologie*), and even more so of Wundt's subsequent attempts to define this field. Wundt's attempt to define ethnopsychology as a science that studies mental products ('geistige Erzeugnisse') he contested by arguing that very many things (the Eiffel Tower, paintings, religious beliefs, etc.) are mental products but that these qua objective entities are nevertheless studied by other sciences (Shpet, 1927/1989, p. 504). Here he agreed with Durkheim's (1937/1977, p. 15) similar contention that social facts should be considered as things ('de considérer les faits sociaux comme des choses') that have an objective existence and need to be studied as such by other sciences than psychology, such as sociology, history, etc. At any rate, Shpet argued, the fact that something is a product of mind does not make it necessarily a part of the subject-matter of psychology. Shpet's own view was that ethnopsychology rested upon

... the understanding of some system of *signs*, consequently, its subject-matter is understood only through the deciphering and interpretation of these signs. That these signs are not merely features of things but also communications about them is obvious from the fact that the existence of the corresponding things is not confined to the pure phenomenon of signs. In other words, we are dealing with signs which do not only refer to things but also express some *meaning*. To show in what this meaning resides is nothing other than to reveal the corresponding subject with its content, i.e., in our case it is the path to a precise fixation of the subject-matter of ethnic psychology. (Shpet, 1927/1989, p. 514)

Shpet hastened to add that this preliminary delineation of the area of ethnopsychology did not yet achieve very much. He argued, for instance, that these meanings do not necessarily have to be psychological. He then went on to argue that ethnopsychology cannot study social phenomena because the goal of scientific analysis is to analyse a *compound into elements which retain the specificity of the phenomenon*, that is, in the case of the social the elements must be social, and not psychological or biological. One cannot, therefore, reduce social or cultural phenomena to psychological ones. What is left, then, for ethnopsychology? In Shpet's (1927/1989, pp. 547-565) view, it was the description of how primitive or modern man experiences objective social phenomena such as language, religion etc. At the basis of such a science is semiotics (semasiology), which enables us to interpret the objective (mostly language-based) signs and meanings which the subject experiences in a given culture.

This certainly is still a long way from Vygotsky's conception of semiotic mediation, but one can nevertheless see interesting parallels in the emphasis on signs and meanings in psychological functioning. Shpet's claim that semiotics should be at the basis of (ethno)psychology certainly must have appealed to Vygotsky.

We may conclude, then, that the reading of both Potebnya and Shpet made Vygotsky very sensitive to the role of signs, language and speech in psychological functioning. The picture that results from Potebnya's and Shpet's theories is that of the human being who is being moulded by the language he or she speaks. The classification of the world into different categories, the forms our thinking takes, the unique way in which we influence ourselves by speaking, the social origin of consciousness in speech, the conception of human beings as being influenced by the objective signs existing in some culture, etc., it was all to be found in some form in Potebnya's and Shpet's psycholinguistic writings. What remained was to fill in their ideas with concrete psychological material and to conceive a coherent psychological theory. History, however, decided otherwise.

From Linguistics to Practice and Psychology

The October Revolution of 1917 meant the start of a gradual but inevitable change of the agenda of scientific psychology in what now became the Soviet Union. Non-materialist pre-revolutionary thinkers such as Potebnya and Shpet were now deemed obsolete and idealist and different concepts such as 'labour', 'tool' and 'social progress' were advanced by the leading ideologists and philosophers as the central concepts of the humanities and social sciences (Van der Veer, 1991). We do not know what happened in Vygotsky's mind around the revolution, but it is tempting to assume that the mature Vygotsky (who had been an ardent 'idealist' in his youth) tried to merge the older linguistic, idealist strand taken from Potebnya and Shpet with the newer Marxist, practical strand into a mature scientific psychology, just like he thought of mature adult thinking as having its genetic roots in both language and practical thought. In this connection, the Marxist emphasis on the notion of human beings as tool-making and tool-using animals, the idea of a fundamental difference between human beings and animals, and the notion of the possibility of social and cultural progress were most important.

The emphasis on tools led Vygotsky to follow the research carried out by Köhler and the discussions it elicited (between people like Karl Bühler, Kurt Koffka, Otto Selz and others) with great fascination and to

discuss it at length in many papers. In the end he concluded that chimpanzees and several lower species can make and use artifacts but that these do not—as is the case for human beings—fundamentally restructure their way of life.

Linked with the issue of tool-use was the issue of speech, if only because Engels (see Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) had argued that the development of tool-use (and the ensuing development of labour) inevitably led to the development of speech. In addition, many thinkers had argued that speech was some kind of tool or instrument for thought and that speech was unique to human beings. In this connection, Vygotsky often approvingly quoted Köhler (1921, p. 192), who had remarked that chimpanzees, despite their problem-solving abilities and frequent tool-use, 'do not even develop the rudiments of culture as they lack the priceless technical means of speech'. The research by Yerkes and others seemed to confirm that higher apes indeed lack the ability to acquire speech.

The resulting picture was as follows: the fundamental difference between animals and human beings is that the latter develop labour (tool-use) and speech. Speech is an essential prerequisite for culture in that it allows us to acquire, preserve and transmit the products of culture. But speech is like a two-edged sword: on the one hand, it is directed outwards and allows us to distinguish the world into different conceptual categories, etc.; on the other hand, for individuals it is directed inward and forces them to see the world in terms of exactly these categories. Another way of putting it is to say that by means of words we can act upon other people and the things that surround us but that by doing so we are at the same time acting upon ourselves (cf. Cole, 1995).

That leaves the notion of social and cultural progress, which was actively promoted by the Soviet Marxists of the 1920s. One can check whether something like social or cultural progress is possible only by comparing different cultures or different periods ('stages') within a single culture. Here Vygotsky's primary sources for theoretical arguments were the anthropological writings of Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl and Thurnwald and the discussions around their work (see Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). In discussing their findings and theories Vygotsky concentrated upon such things as writing systems, counting procedures and conceptual development. He had no problem in arguing that current writing systems are more flexible than older, pictorial systems and that modern counting procedures are more powerful than the classic ones which involve the use of body parts. He also claimed that some primitive people might habitually use a form of conceptual

thinking (using family concepts) which in western culture is less widespread and that is regarded as a stage in the ontogeny of conceptual thinking that is ordinarily overcome to a quite considerable degree. The trend that Vygotsky observed in the history of humankind was that of a decreasing reliance on material mediational means and an increasing use of abstract, de-contextualized words not tied to specific objects. A very similar trend had been discussed by Potebnya, who often showed that words lose their concrete material meaning as they grow older and are used by many generations of people. For example, the original word for two in some culture might be 'horns' because animals tend to have two horns. Gradually, however, this concrete meaning of the word will wear away, and the word will be less and less tied to a concrete object or image and only its abstract meaning of 'two-ness' will remain. This whole process is quite similar, of course, to the process of de-contextualization which has so often been discussed by Wertsch (e.g. 1985) and others.

It is also interesting to see which cultural phenomenon described by his immediate sources Vygotsky chose not to discuss. It is quite clear that in dealing with the psychological significance of cultural objects he did not include the full range of cultural phenomena that was analysed by his contemporary ethnographers. Thurnwald, Durkheim and others investigated different systems of law, moral thinking, religion, art, kinship systems, etc., but Vygotsky chose to concentrate upon counting, writing and language (speech in his terms) at large. Counting and speech in general served to illustrate the phenomenon which Vygotsky posited as a general law, that is, that psychological functions are first carried out with the help of external mediators and only subsequently by means of internal mediators. Writing, counting and speech all illustrated another fundamental aspect underlined by Vygotsky, that is, that language-based tools 'backfire', that is, serve to influence the inner world of the subject. Finally, writing and counting systems can be seen as milestones in the historical development of mankind and from a certain point of view they can be seen as testifying of the progress of mankind and human culture. Selecting these aspects of culture thus nicely fitted in with the dominant Soviet theme of social and cultural progress. The other, equally language-based, cultural phenomena dealt with by the professional cultural anthropologists of his time were probably ignored by Vygotsky because they were less fit to illustrate the three phenomena (the external-internal mediation transition, the 'backfire' phenomenon and the notion of progress) just listed.

Comparing Cultures

However, by emphasizing those selected aspects of culture that from some (debatable) point of view can be seen as displaying progress Vygotsky introduced the notions of progress and hierarchy in the comparison of culture. There is no doubt that he and his closest collaborator Luria, just like many of their contemporaries, thought that different cultures can be ordered in a developmental hierarchy with the European type of culture at the top. In a paper on the problem of the education of national minorities, for instance, Vygotsky argued that the level of their cultures was 'low' and that they needed a 'forced cultural development' in order to 'take a grandiose leap on the ladder of their cultural development' and to reach the level of the 'unified socialist culture' (Vygotsky, 1929b). These statements clearly indicate that Vygotsky was of the opinion that the national minorities were still enjoying a backward culture of a type that we westerners had long left behind. In fact, his thinking in this domain closely paralleled his thinking in the domain of what was called 'defectology'. Following Petrova (1925), Vygotsky distinguished between problematic children with some organic problem and 'primitive' children who were basically lacking a repertoire of abstract, de-contextualized cognitive skills. The latter could be raised to the required level of abstract thinking through education.

Basically the same attitude is noticeable in the writings of Luria of that period. Talking about his fieldwork in Uzbekistan, Luria (1931) mentions the need to raise the cultural level of a population that is still backward culturally. Several years later, in discussing the results of his second stay in Uzbekistan, Luria (1934) still regarded Uzbekistan as a 'primitive' society and he explicitly used the term 'levels of cultural development'. In fact, it was only in the 1970s, when Luria discussed the fieldwork in Uzbekistan in his intellectual biography, that we suddenly learned that Uzbek culture was not uniform and that Uzbekistan 'could [also] boast of an ancient high culture which included the outstanding scientific and poetic achievements associated with such figures as Uleg Bek, a mathematician and astronomer ... the philosopher Al-Buruni, the physician Ali-ibn-Senna (Avecenna), the poets Saadi and Nezami, and others'. Luria now attributed the formerly low cultural level of the 'peasant masses' to the fact that they were being exploited by feudal lords, while the Uzbek women were kept isolated under the influence of 'the conservative teachings of the Islamic religion' (Luria, 1979, pp. 60-61). We have clear indications, then, that both Vygotsky and Luria were inclined to globally rank-order cultures

on a ladder of cultural development and to regard contemporary non-western cultures as relics of the past (cf. Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

The dominant notion of social and cultural progress (characteristic of the mentality at the beginning of this century) and the equation of social and cultural progress with the invention of new technology is also nicely illustrated by the following enthusiastic lines about America written by Luria to his relatives in the late 1920s:

America is a country with an exceptionally high culture. The Americans have amazingly polished roads from the Atlantic to the Pacific ocean, lots of cars, radios which make an astoundingly soft sound, hot and cold water in each of the country's houses, marvelous eternal pens which made me forget the simple ink-pot and ideal statistical machines. (Letter from Boston dated 25 September 1929; see Luria, 1994, p. 53)

These lines now seem terribly naïve and to testify to a belief in technology and human beings' 'dominance over the Thing' which many people lost after World War II, the growing consciousness of environmental pollution (cf. Shi-xu, 1995), etc. Indeed, it seems as if Luria equated 'an exceptionally high culture' with 'lots of cars, radios ... and ideal statistical machines'. This is very significant because Luria, just like Vygotsky, was a person who was exquisitely aware of other aspects of culture, such as literature, religion, morals, etc., etc. The fact that he chose the mentioned features of American culture to illustrate its superiority once again testifies to the fact that both he and Vygotsky shared a belief in technology and the promise it held for cultural and social progress that was characteristic of the 1920s but that is no longer universally held. In this respect, Malinowski's words, given as an epigraph to this paper and written less than a decade after Luria's observation, form a striking contrast. In fact, the difference between Luria's naïve designation of American culture ('lots of cars, radios') and Malinowski's uncanny description ('gigantic hypertrophy of material objects') is so immense that, retrospectively, one would almost be tempted to follow Vygotsky's and Luria's example and interpret this difference in developmental terms.

Culture and Word Meanings

For Vygotsky human history was, on the one hand, the history of western man's growing dominion over nature through the invention of tools and the perfection of technology, but, on the other hand, it was also the history of man's gradual mastery of the self through the invention and use of 'the cultural technique of signs' (Vygotsky, 1928, p. 76). One could thus see progress in two respects: (a) through

superior domination of nature through ever better technology; and (b) through improved mastery of the self through 'psychotechnology'. Being primarily interested in the working of the mind, Vygotsky felt much more attracted to the field of psychotechnology, that is, the ways signs can be used to improve the mastery of the self and the self's understanding of the world. Through his reading of Potebnya and Shpet he was inclined to regard words as the key tool for individual functioning, as the 'first and fundamental means of progress'. In the end his primary interest was and remained 'what words do to our mind', and one can trace powerful influences of the Humboldtian tradition in his thinking up to his final writings. This interest led him to concentrate upon signs and meanings and upon the way environmental events are conceptualized by the child or adult, rather than upon the significance of environmental events as such.

Vygotsky's interest in the things words do to our mind also made him less of a Marxist than was demanded at that time. Elsewhere (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) we have shown that Vygotsky's Soviet contemporaries somehow sensed that his thinking was alien to the prevailing ideology and that such researchers as Leont'ev criticized Vygotsky for his exclusive devotion to the issue of word meaning, which in Vygotsky's thinking seemed unconnected with material reality. Leont'ev (1935/1983, pp. 70-73), for example, listed the results of Vygotsky's research into the role of word meanings in child development and then went on to argue that the views of his former colleagues were in need of critique. We should not think that the development of word meanings in the child is determined by the cultural meanings it acquires and that the child in its turn can influence cultural meanings. Neither the growth of culture nor the development of the child can be viewed as solely depending upon the interaction of subjects. This would, in Leont'ev's view, be highly similar to the erroneous views of the French sociological school. What was lacking in such a view—in addition to the interacting subjects or the subject interacting with his or her culture—was a third factor, namely material reality itself. Leont'ev argued that the evolution of word meanings should not be seen 'as based upon the evolution of the word itself or upon social interaction viewed in isolation and abstractly, but as based upon the changing relationships between man and nature, upon the emergence and development of labour and societal relationships'. It is as if Leont'ev was saying here that Vygotsky was still primarily thinking along the lines of the Humboldt-Potebnya-Shpet paradigm and largely ignored the social or societal (e.g. social class) and material aspects of culture. It is as if these critics claimed that Vygotsky paid too

much attention to the role of language in child development to the detriment of the attention paid to the role of the tool (cf. Bühler's epigraph at the beginning of this paper). One need not fully agree with this criticism (Vygotsky was at times very explicit about the material connectedness of words) to see that judging by the present account of some roots of Vygotsky's thinking it was at least partially correct in the sense that the emphasis in Vygotsky's conception of the role of culture and language in child development was different from that of his contemporary and later activity theorists such as Leont'ev.

Conclusions

What, then, can we conclude as to the concept of culture which Vygotsky used in his scientific thinking? With Humboldt, Potebnya, Shpet and others Vygotsky believed that the study of language is of the utmost importance for our understanding of (developmental) psychology. This led him to undertake the study of the development of speech and language in child development and to posit that the cognitive and emotional development of the child is to a great extent determined by the conceptual changes that the child's thinking undergoes. In Vygotsky's principal works the word 'culture' is equivalent to the concepts or word meanings (rather than cultural practices) existing in that culture. In his view the various conceptual systems existing in different cultures could be rank-ordered with the academic (abstract), scientific systems of concepts at the top. This allowed him to say that both adult people from non-western cultures and western children should be introduced to the western-type academic conceptual system, which would cause a progressive shift in their thinking. In his view, then, cultural (and individual) progress was linked to the introduction to certain ways of conceptualizing reality. Vygotsky was thus no cultural relativist but a theorist who emphasized the way word meanings within a certain society shape our view of reality.

Vygotsky's concept of culture is powerful but limited and biased. It is powerful in that it allows us to explain the way individuals master the linguistically mediated aspects of their cultural heritage and the way they are changed in that process. It is limited because it is less fit to explain the innovation of culture by individuals (cf. Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) and the transmission of presumably non-linguistically mediated aspects of culture such as the (culturally variable) critical distance between individuals and body odour (Hannigan, 1995). It is biased in the sense that it capitalizes on abstract, de-contextualized thinking and regards other ways of thinking as lower or less developed.

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Biography

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