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Dear Reader,

In this second issue of Correspondences, we turn to Vygotsky. Susan Wells's searching comment clarifies both his philosophical purposes and his usefulness to us.

Lev Vygotsky, who has been called "the Mozart of psychologists," died of TB in the 1930s, before Sullin had a chance to kill him. His insistence that all study of language and thought must begin with "the unit of meaning," not adding it in as the "semantic component," is crucially important for an understanding of the kind of process computing is. We should read Vygotsky carefully (dialectically), alert to the ambiguities inevitably faced when we read a difficult text in translation. It isn't enough to look up "composition" in the index of Thought and Language, as many researchers seem to do, recovering a few remarks about the relationship of reading and writing before hurrying back to Piaget and Father Ong.

In Reclaiming the Imagination (Boynton/Cook, 1984), I have excerpted passages from Vygotsky's Mind in Society which set forth his argument about what makes human activity symbolic and not a matter of stimulus and response. The analysis these offers, perhaps, the best point of departure in studying Vygotsky, but Susan Wells takes us to the heart of the matter in her discussion of Vygotsky's chapter on concept formation in Thought and Language. Wartenberg, philologo extraordinaire, has recently been reading Vygotsky in the course of his study of ESL theory and practice. His response will, I expect, get the dialectic going.

Letters and comments on this Vygotsky issue will appear in Correspondences 4. Meanwhile, in our next issue, Eugene Green will read Walker Percy on "metaphor as mistake," and we will press responses to our first issue on porcupines, darting needles, and the hazardous practice of repelling—nodes of interpreting interpretations. Your letters are welcome.

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Vygotsky has been important for composition teachers and theoreticians ever since James Britton summarized his experimental study of concept formation in Language and Learning (London: Penguin, 1970). But at the number of citations in composition journals has grown, the use of Vygotsky in composition theory has become perfunctory, reflecting less a critical encounter with his work than the obligation to display him as an authority. Vygotsky is called on to support such positions as the sociohistorical origin of speech, the complexity of concept formation, or the importance of inner speech. Such citations do not misrepresent Vygotsky, but it would be a shame if so brilliant a theorist were to be reduced, through constant invocation, to a standard authority. We might do well, then, to reread Thought and Language (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962) as if it were not the work of a major figure, attending to what is strange or embarrassing in it.

A convenient place to start is with the account of Vygotsky's experimental study of concept formation, the fifth chapter of Thought and Language. To read this chapter as a narrative is to be surprised by it. First, Vygotsky is surprisingly silent about his own experimental procedure. We know a great deal about that procedure, including the apparatus he used, how it was presented to his subjects, and how experimenters responded to the subjects' activities. But none of this information comes from the text of Thought and Language; it is supplied in a footnote by a helpful editor who discovered a parallel study. Surely, whatever conventions for reporting experiments Vygotsky acknowledged, the note was not part of an experimental report in a narrative of the experiment. True, we know that Vygotsky's experimental reports were only schematic descriptions, and that he disagreed with the emphasis on measurement and reproducibility that was emerging in behaviorist research. But we also know that
Vygotsky was quite capable of providing a narrative of crucial experiments. In the essay reprinted in *Mind and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), we can read descriptions of experimental studies of choice reaction, of the relations of gesture to language, and of writing and memory. All these accounts are influential, but they include both a narrative framework and considerable detail. If the preconditions of any experimental report is the description of an experiment, a description Vygotsky was quite able to provide, why did he omit it here?

Matters do not become clearer when we read on. The last report of Vygotsky’s is a discussion of three phases of concept formation. But these phases are defined inconsistently: sometimes by the objects he child grouped, sometimes by perceptions imputed to him, sometimes by the strategies he used to form groups. And Vygotsky does not seem to be interested in defining the boundaries of his phases, or in demonstrating that he does not connect his three phases of concept formation to the behavior of children at any particular age; the experiments subjects themselves are very loosely defined as “children, adolescents, and adults” (TL, 58). And we are given no account of how children negotiate the transitions among phases. At one unspecified moment, the child thinks in heuristics at another, his epistemology is “partly outgrown” and he thinks in complexes (TL, 65).

Vygotsky ends his initial exposition with a disclaimer. Although he has uncovered what he calls the “very essence of the genetic process in a schematic form,” he never meant it to provide a sequential, empirically verifiable account of individual development.

But an experimentally induced process of concept formation never mirrors the genetic development exactly as it occurs in life. The basic forms of concrete thinking that we have encountered appear in reality in mixed states. The morphological analysis gives so far must be followed by a functional and genetic analysis (TL, 69).

If Vygotsky’s account of the phases of concept formation is not meant to mirror a concrete developmental sequence, we need not have been surprised by his casual treatment of the phases, their boundaries, and the relations among them. But the “functional and genetic analysis” that follows only confirms our unease with Vygotsky’s experimental report. It is a rag-bag of examples from developmental psychology, ancient languages, anthropologe, etymology, sign language, and dream logic. After this heap of instances, Vygotsky resumes his experimental report with a description of the third phase of concept formation.

What has gone on here? What have we read? Next to Piaget, Vygotsky seems discontinuous, contradictory, even impressionistic. I hold, however, that while Vygotsky’s overt intention was to refute Piaget, the model for his own text was quite different. Piaget’s early work, with its assertions of universal cognitive structures and a uniform developmental path, seemed to Marxists pedagogically both ethnocentric and conservative. Piaget seemed to them to be arguing for a solidary, self-nourished cognitive development; early Soviet education was collective and group-centered, focused as much on political awareness as on cognitive skills. Vygotsky’s critique of Piaget, then, was not enacted within a charged political context, for an audience which did not read “genetics” as a fancy word for biology. Rather, it invoked the compelling model of Marx’s *Capital*, where he understands “the task of tracing the genesis of this money-form” Marx was not at all concerned with writing a history of money, but with uncovering hidden relations between money, commodities, and social forms. And indeed, Vygotsky read *Capital* in three terms, as an analytic rather than a historical document:

The whole of *Capital* is written according to the following method: Marx analyzes a single living ‘cell’ of capitalist society—for example, the nature of value. Within this cell he uncovers the structure of the entire system and all of its economic institutions (Unpublished notebook, quoted in "Introduction" to *Mind and Society*).

Such a method is closer to philosophical reflection than to empirical research; it implies moving from abstractions to the highly structured concrete instances in which they are encountered in social life. For Piaget, on the other hand, the term “genetic,” as in “genetic psychology,” is clearly descriptive, indicating the transitions between stages of mental development. And in later texts, Piaget was to define “genetic epistemology” as an application of the experimental method to the study of knowledge. In both cases, Piaget is interested in concrete developmental processes as they are empirically studied, rather than with conceptual relations.
The contrast between Marx's "genesis" and Piaget's might explain Vygotsky's account of his experiment: he has fixed "two contradictory methods. First he claims, following Marx, to have uncovered the "very essence" of a genetic process, and then admits, as if in dialogue with Piaget, that it does not "mirror genetic development" (77, 69). Vygotsky had two available models of genesis he may not have been aware of how deeply they were at odds. If, as I have been suggesting, Vygotsky was responding as much to Marx as to Piaget, it might be worthwhile to see how Marx's analysis in Capital unfolds, and whether this comparison suggests a new reading of Vygotsky.

Marx's analysis of commodities in the opening chapters of Capital, like Vygotsky's account of his experiment in concept formation, rests on an empirical interpretation. Rather than investigating the relations among specific commodities, or developing an analysis of their actual prices, Marx focuses on the abstract values of commodities, the relations between them that make exchange possible. For Marx, such an abstract method was not an error in presentation, but an essential tool of thought. As he said in the Preface to the first German edition of Capital, "In the analysis of economic forms, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both." In this case, the force of abstraction operates through the concept of value.

Marx begins so trace the genesis of money: by working with the simplest possible commodity relation—one article is exchanged for another. The commodities are named, but purely for the sake of convenience, and the exchange is interesting only because of the relations of equivalence it establishes. Marx moves from this simple, extremely abstract, exchange to more complex ones in three additional stages. In serial exchange, a stable amount of a single commodity can be exchanged for a whole series of items lining, for example, in exchange for a cotton piece or coconut. In the third stage, Marx posits a universal equivalent which can be exchanged for all others and so brings them into relation with each other. In the last stage of the genesis, the universal equivalent takes the form of money. Marx used the tensions and contradictions among the abstract elements in his model to move them from one stage to another. His informing question is not "What happened next?" but "Given these oppositions, what is the next implication of this analysis?" Indeed, we might summarize Marx's genesis as an account in which the verb "next" had a logical rather than a narrative force.

Marx's explicit statements of method may be a guide for reading Vygotsky, who—at least in some phases of his investigation—also seems interested in analyzing the relations among the basic elements of a concept rather than in narrating its concrete development. Certainly, Marx's analysis of money resembles Vygotsky's stages of concept formation. Vygotsky's first stage, the "heap," is formed synchronically, on the basis of relations among individual blocks; what is revealed in the heap is the child's subjective relation to the objects he or she has gathered together. The heap then presents in reduced form the basic relation expressed in all of the phases of concept formation: the relation between qualities of objects and the situation of the observer. This relation is mediated by the meaning of words, since it is through words that the objects are organized into groups, and it is words that guide the child's perception of objects. Analogous to Vygotsky's heap is the first stage in Marx's analysis of commodities. There, the basic tension of the system—that so many different objects can become equivalent to one another—is mediated by the concept of value.

Vygotsky's second stage, the complex, is equivalent to the second and third stages of Marx's commodity formation. At the beginning of Vygotsky's second stage, the child brought the blocks into loose but real relations with one another. In one early form of complex, each block was related to the one before it on a different basis, so that a red thick block led to a thick large block, which led to a large green block. A similar serial organization characterizes Marx's second stage of commodity formation: so much linen equals so many coats, so much oil, so much wool. In Marx's third stage, this series of equivalences functions simultaneously, so that a fixed quantity of linen can be exchanged for a whole set of equivalent commodities. Marx's "universal equivalent" resembles Vygotsky's "pseudo-concept": the universal equivalent has not yet become money because, even though this commodity can be exchanged for anything else, it cannot express its own price. The pseudo-concept, similarly, is not a true concept because it does not include an understanding of its own logic. In both cases, a reflexive dimension is missing.

Neither Marx nor Vygotsky explicitly states in the final stage of the genesis they analyze. Vygotsky's discussion of the "true concept" is relatively brief, and Marx gives only a perfunctory account of the money form. For both theorists, what counts is conceptual unification, the evolution of complex idea into simple elements and primary relations, followed by its reconstruction, mediated by the internal tensions among these relations. The finished object—the true concept, the money form—is less revealing than the analysis that reconstructs it.
Vygotsky's analysis of concept formation is not, of course, a simple translation of Marx's analysis of the commodity form. And I am not suggesting that Vygotsky wrote Thought and Language with Capital open before him, but that Marx's work provided the critical focus of Vygotsky's thought. Vygotsky found in Marx the traps and figures of thought that he needed.

Some reading suggests that Vygotsky was not providing a description of how concepts-forming skills develop so much as an analysis of the basic relations among objects, actions, and perceptions that determine the shape of concepts at whatever level of formation. If the experiment was not intended to show how concepts are generated, but to provide an analysis of their structures of meaning, then precise experimental tactics were not very important to Vygotsky. If the 'stages' of concept formation are representations of logical relations, then their correlation to concrete developmental steps is less important than what they reveal to an investigator. And, if Vygotsky's stages provide the means for investigating such relations rather than for categorizing behaviors, then they will necessarily be defined by correlations of objects, actions, and perceptions, rather than by more conventional criteria.

But if this reading explains some anachronism in Thought and Language, it raises questions of its own. If Vygotsky was actually writing an abstract analysis, why didn't he bother to perform and report an experiment? The answer lies, at least in part, in the Soviet transformation of Marxism into a body of data rather than a critical method. Marx's polemics were being presented to Soviet readers as scientific monographs; Emile's occasional pamphlets were hailed as founding a 'science of thought.' In such a context, 'science' became a very elastic concept; the more unorthodox Marxists described their work as scientific. As long as Strech was maintaining his political affiliations with the Soviet Union, he claimed that his monochromatic play simply applied the science of Marxism to the theater. And the filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein, a close friend of Strech's, called for a new science of thought. "Creating a science of thought," in a manner function would the activity analytic cell analogous to Marx's value. Vygotsky, too, conceived his work as founding a new science. Especially in his polemics with Piaget, he utilized a mechanistic procedure to normal experimental methods, allowing his central term, "genesis," to become equivocal. My reading of Thought and Language suggests that it is shaped by deep contradictions between Vygotsky's understanding of his work as normal science and the critical impulse that informed it.

How does this analysis affect our reading of Thought and Language? I think it should make us pay more attention to what Vygotsky says, and perhaps see what he says. The less we are misled by the work's presentation, the more we can learn from its intent. Consider two influential readings of Vygotsky, those by Andrei Lumsford ("Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," College English 31, September 1977, 29-46) and Linda Flower ("Writer-Based Process for Problem in Writing," College English 41, September 1979, 19-37). These two readings, indeed, are quite different, but both present Vygotsky's work under the rubric of how to conceptualize development. Unfortunately, this project requires that the sharpest parts of Vygotsky's work be lost.

Lumsford presents Vygotsky's stages of concept formation as a developmental series, a cognitive ladder for students to ascend. This reading centers Lumsford's interpretation of Thought and Language; any distinction that in this text will be read as a developmental narrative. For example, Vygotsky distinguishes spontaneous and scientific concepts by their origins; spontaneous concepts are produced by reflection, while scientific concepts come from instruction. Lumsford reads this as a developmental path: the scientific concept is elevated into the 'true' concept and later conflated with awareness of one's own mental processes, a quite different sort of ability. So literally does Vygotsky support a developmental interpretation that everything in the text must be modified if coherence is to be assured.

Linda Flower's approach to Vygotsky is different. While she agrees with Lumsford in designating basic writers as thinking in complex, she sees this notion analytically, identifying the organization and stylistic traits of the writer and relating these traits to certain writing strategies. But Flower's approach differs precisely in this element—objects, mental processes, and strategies—that has been fused in Vygotsky's account. Such an analytic approach is more precisely defined, but it may not be the case that we can make of Vygotsky. No empirical researcher can use Vygotsky's categories as they stand; those categories enable us to reflect on the relations between thought and action, but not to design conventionally valid studies of them. Vygotsky's categories enable us to consider concepts as subjective relations, as attempts to grasp a material and social world, and as communicative strategies—in a word, they enable us to analyze concepts metaphorically. We miss much of the conceptual richness of these categories if we use them as a kind of conceptual space for designing quasi-experimental studies.

The complexity of Thought and Language can stand as an example of the confusion between the critical intent of an investigation and its scientific presentation. Such conceptions are not confined to Marxism. They are simply dramatic instances of the tension between any theoretical framework and its concrete development, tensions that can
be understood, but not simply dissolved. Thought and Language also suggests, perhaps, that we have some work to do in understanding the basic concepts that shape our discipline before we can profitably engage in empirical studies. Some thorough reflection on writing as a relation between the writer, the language, the text, and the material and social world, reflection that did not assume that "writing" was something already known, might teach us as much as any number of diagnostic studies of individual writers.

Vygotsky once wrote that "to formulate the categories and concepts that are specifically relevant to a new field of study" was "to create one's own Capital!" (MS. 8). In Thought and Language, Vygotsky was creating the categories and concept of a new psychology, writing his own Capital. For us, as theorists and teachers of writing, that task is still incomplete.

**Source:**


**Talking Leaves: Conversations with White Paper**

**Warren Herendeen**

**Mercy College**

Sequoya, chief of the Cherokee, was fascinated by the spectacle of American soldiers being talked to by their mail and talking back to blank white leaves which were then folded, sealed, and dispatched. Sequoya noticed many other conversations the soldiers had, with books and newspapers: all was so different from Cherokee ways of communication. Suddenly, an idea was born: Sequoya would discover how to make the leaves speak Cherokee. He listened carefully, counted the syllables in his language, devised a syllabary, laboriously learned how to record the sounds, and then on heaps of bark chips wrote every Cherokee word he knew or heard. Unfortunately, his wife, in the indignation of her ignorance, burned his heaps. He left, on a quest for a better system and for a new wife more sympathetic to Cherokee linguistics.

Finally, he succeeded in inventing an alphabetic system that could perfectly analyze the Cherokee language. Placing his trained young daughter in a Cherokee meeting, he left while discussion ensued, returning to read back to the assembled Cherokee his daughter's verbatim record of the meeting. Thus was the transforming concept of writing brought to the Cherokee. It was not a heap of broken bark chips, nor a complex of words organized by similarities of sounds or spellings, nor a pseudo-concept such as an assessment of the skill demonstrated by his daughter in taking the minutes of the meeting. Rather, it was a concept, an abstract method that permitted the exchange of one mode of expression for another, of orality for literacy. It expressed its own value no matter what literacy form it took and embodied a reflective dimension. This is writing, essential tool of thought in civilized societies.

Susan Wells has provided an invaluable analogue to Sequoya's brilliant achievement in her commentary on Vygotsky's theory of concept-formation. The effect of her new reading of Vygotsky, which brings semantics to the forefront, is not so much to improve Flower's and Lunsford's interpretations of Vygotsky as to displace them from so central a position as they have occupied. Wells/ Vygotsky's different emphasis on cognitive processes as they relate to the composing activity highlights concept-formation as a supreme critical tool for the human species. Inner speech is examined as a dynamic mode of self-regularization thought. Vygotsky, it now seems clear, was more interested in identifying critical tools than in establishing experimentally the precise stages or the exact ages (if they exist) at which one is thinking in heaps, complexes, pseudo-concepts, or concepts.

But where does this leave the composition teacher whose classroom is filled with "basic writers," who allegedly cannot think in concepts? I must confess that one explicit assumption underlying Lunsford's essay—that basic writers lack conceptual ability—was counter to my experience with nontraditional students and non-native-inmates of the New York State prison system. A South Bronx gang I helped organize into a block improvement council, and ESL speakers with little formal training in their first language. I recall no instance in which these persons demonstrated an inability to think conceptually. In one instance, one of the South Bronx group, a high school dropout after his freshman year, had composed a dozen notebooks containing chapters organized by various techniques (dreams, TV skits, adventures on and off the block, etc.).
Basic writers have limited experience of writing...
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Correspondences Two

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