

Andy Blunden recently published the paper “Vygotsky & the Concept of Consciousness,” which is available at <http://www.ethicalpolitics.org/wits/vygotsky-consciousness.pdf>, and is followed by a video at: <http://vimeo.com/21966323>

This paper is focused on one of the most difficult concepts of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory. I was interested in this paper because the concept of consciousness in Vygotsky’s theory is, in certain respects, one of my research topics. Moreover, Andy Blunden is one of the best experts in this area among those who called themselves “Vygotskians.” My knowledge of Vygotsky is very limited. I just read Vygotsky’s books and articles during last 15 years and I wanted to learn from this paper.

Now I want to comment on what I have learned:

“...in his first speech to the Congress of Psychoneurology in 1924, Vygotsky spoke in the language of reflexology... The conventional wisdom about this speech is that it represents the reflexologist stage in Vygotsky’s development, that is, that he was at this time a reflexologist, and later he became a reactologist and then ... But if we take account of Vygotsky’s background, this is really not believable”. (p.1)

I think that if we take into account Vygotsky’s actual background that we will come to a very different conclusion. First, **there was** a reflexologist stage in Vygotsky’s development. He started his work in psychology in 1917 in Gomel as the head of a psychological laboratory. There is a lot evidence that shows that reflexology was the theoretical background of the experiments that he conducted in 1917-1924 (see, for example, the book by Vygotskaya and Lifanova, 1999). Second, his first book, “Pedagogical psychology,” published in 1926, was completely written before 1924 (Vygotsky,1987). This book was entirely based on the reflexological approach to consciousness, and in some senses, it could be called “Reflexological pedagogical psychology”. Third, the presentation that Vygotsky did for the Congress of Psychoneurology in Petrograd in 1924 was directly based on the idea of the unification of reflexology and psychology on the basis of the concept of reflex as the objective method **which should** be applied to study of human consciousness (Vygotsky, 1997). These facts show that there was a reflexological stage in Vygotsky’s development between 1917 and 1924. That was Vygotsky’s background; or at least, that was the major part of his background.

Blunden writes: *...reflexologist stage in Vygotsky’s development, that is, that he was at this time a reflexologist, and later he became a reactologist.*

I do not see the logic here. First, the fact that he was a reflexologist does not mean that “later he became a reactologist.” His 1925 paper, “Consciousness as a problem of psychology of behaviour” (Vygotsky, 1987), clearly shows that he moved from the problem of reflex to the problem of behaviour. Vygotsky notes in this paper that his ideas were close to the ideas of psychologist-behaviorists such as Watson and Lashley and their “behaviouristic interpretation

of consciousness” (Vygotsky, 1987, Vol. 3 p. 377). I can hardly imagine a reactologist saying these words.

“So Vygotsky has managed to argue exclusively from within the framework of reflexology to a point which completely negates reflexology. Without disturbing the universal claim that “everything is a reflex,” Vygotsky has turned the concepts and methods of reflexology against themselves and proved that reflexology, that is to say, the study of the physiology of the nervous system, must merge itself with the methods and concepts of its opposite, subjective psychology” (p.2).

I do not see any evidence in Vygotsky’s published papers of 1924-1926 directly saying that reflexology must merge itself with the methods and concepts of its opposite, subjective psychology. On the contrary, *Pedagogical psychology* is completely based on directly opposite position – subjective psychology **should apply** the methods developed in reflexology to the study of human consciousness (which Vygotsky defines as the reflex of reflexes). Here he saw the solution of the crisis in psychology.

At the same time, it should be noted that Vygotsky was a student of Potebnya, the leading advocate of Phenomenology in Russia at the time (p.7)

Vygotsky could not be the student of Alexander Potebnya simply because Potebnya died in 1891, five years before Vygotsky was born. Therefore, Potebnya could not be an advocate of Phenomenology *at that time*, i.e. in 1920s and 1930s, when Vygotsky was working in psychology. And finally, Potebnya was not an advocate of Phenomenology in Russia *at any time*. Potebnya’s theory and the concept of “internal form of the word” had nothing to do with Phenomenology at all. There is no evidence in Potebnya’s known writings where he advocated or even mentioned Phenomenology as a philosophical or linguistic doctrine. By the way, Phenomenology as a philosophical doctrine first appeared in the beginning of the 20th Century, almost 15 years after Potebnya’s death.

Vygotsky identified different units according to the problem he was trying to elucidate. His most famous project was the study of the relation between thinking and speaking, in other words, the intellect. Here Vygotsky said that “word meaning” constituted the unit of analysis, and a study of the development of word meaning would allow the researcher to track the entire development of the intellect. (p.9)

First, I do not think, according to Vygotsky, that the intellect is the relation between thinking and speaking. I wonder where Blunden believes he found Vygotsky to have considered that the intellect is such a relation. Second, in his famous book, Vygotsky investigates not the problem of the relations between thinking and speaking, but the **unity of thinking and speech**. The concept of the unit of analysis was introduced by Vygotsky not for the analysis of the **relations**, but for the analysis of the complex wholes and the unity of thinking and speech as an example of such a whole. The analysis by units is the way to analyse these complex unities without losing the nature of the unity, rather than the analysis **of the relations** of its components. The relations of the atoms of Oxygen and Hydrogen constitute water. But does this mean that they are units of analysis? They are elements, interrelated

components. The molecule of water is the unit of analysis. Similarly, to analyse the unity of thinking and speech we do not need to analyse the relations between thinking and speech (they are elements, components) – we need to find the “molecule,” which is “word meaning.” In sum: Vygotsky’s idea of word meaning as the unit of analysis of thinking and speech has nothing to do with the “unit of analysis” of the “relation between thinking and speaking,” as Blunden writes.

More generally, he used “artefact-mediated action” as the unit of analysis, of which “word meaning” is a special case. That is, the simplest archetypal unit of consciousness is the use of an artefact from the culture to mediate an action in relation to another person. You can see that using a word meaningfully is a special case of an artefact-mediated action. (p.10)

First, I was unable to find in Vygotsky’s published works any notion that “artefact-mediated action” is presented as the unit of analysis of something. In *The History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions* (1931/1989) he analyses “mediated action”. To be more exact, he analyzes “sign mediated action”. Moreover, Vygotsky was categorically against the way of unifying of two types of mediators (tool and sign) into one concept, “artefact”. Second, the unit of analysis is the unit which cannot be further divided without losing the properties of the complex whole to which the unit belongs. However, “sign mediated action” for Vygotsky was not the unit of analysis, since, as he put it, any higher form of behaviour “can always be divided completely without any remainder into the natural, elementary neuromental processes that make it up (1987, vol. 4, p. 81). On the other hand, in Vygotsky’s papers “the instrumental act” was defined as the unit of analysis of behaviour (Vygotsky, 1987, Vol. 3 p. 87). Third, what kind of unit is the instrumental act? “It is the simplest piece, segment section of behavior with which research is dealing: an elementary unit of behaviour” (Ibid). Simplest piece, segment, section (otrezok in Russian original text) means that the “instrumental act” was considered not as the unit of analysis, but as an element. So what we have here is the analysis by elements, not units. In sum: neither “mediated action” nor “instrumental act” is presented in Vygotsky’s texts as the unit of analysis. “Mediated action,” rather, is the complex whole which has to be analysed by units, whereas the “instrumental act” is the simplest element (atom), but not the unit (molecule). In any case, there are no reasons to say that “mediated action” was for Vygotsky the unit of analysis.

This might look paradoxical because it does not correspond with the Vygotsky’s claims about the advantages of analysis by units. I think there is no contradiction here if we take into account the evolution of Vygotsky’s thoughts. The mediated action and the instrumental act were in the focus of Vygotsky’s research in 1927-1930, whereas the idea of analysis by units appeared later, only in 1932, with no connection to “mediated action.” These two things belong to different periods of Vygotsky’s work. Even if we leave that aside, what is clear is that “mediated action” is not the “molecule” at all, that “word meaning” is the “molecule” of the unity of thinking and speech. This means that “word meaning” cannot be a special case of the “artefact mediated action,” as Blunden writes.

Later he identified perezhivanie as a very general unit for the development of consciousness. Perezhivanie is a Russian word similar to the German word Erlebnis and translates into English as “a lived experience” somewhat like “an adventure.” Its sense is both subjective

and objective in that it refers to the significance of an objective event for a given subject (p. 10).

On the same page (Figure) Blunden says that perezhivanie is the unit of development of personality. It seems to me that the personality is not consciousness, and therefore cannot have the same unit of analysis. Yet, I can agree with Blunden's opinion that the development of consciousness is part of the development of the personality. However, there are more serious reasons which do not allow me to agree with what Blunden says.

First, Vygotsky never identified perezhivanie as a very general unit for the development of consciousness. Perezhivanie was identified by Vygotsky as "...an actual dynamic unit of consciousness, i.e. the complete unit which consciousness consists of" (Vygotsky, 1998, Vol.54, p.295). A 'dynamic unit of consciousness' is not the same thing as a 'unit of development of consciousness.' It is the unit which consciousness consists of, not the unit that the development of consciousness consists of. Second, perezhivanie has nothing to do with "an adventure"; this is obviously a mistake in translation.

As a short conclusion I should say that I really have learned a lot from this paper by Blunden. My main lesson is that I see how difficult it is to describe the concept of consciousness in Vygotsky with no clear idea of Vygotsky's theory. Vygotsky created his theory as a system of theoretical principles and concepts which was able to explain the nature of human consciousness. His approach was genetic, i.e., he took the development of the human mind (consciousness) as its subject-matter. Every concept - "mediated action," "unit of analysis," perezhivanie, and many others ("social origins of mind," "interaction of the ideal and real form," "zone of proximal development," and others) - takes its place and plays a role within cultural-historical theory. Vygotsky formulated the general genetic law of cultural development describing the development of consciousness. To speak about the concept of consciousness in Vygotsky's theory, yet saying nothing about these theoretical instruments, is a very difficult task. The way Blunden selected to present Vygotsky's concept of consciousness is misleading. In these comments I mainly just wanted to show examples of these misleading issues. To study Vygotsky is a hard job, yet there is no other way to come to an understanding of his approach to human consciousness.

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