

Which is (More) Original, and Does Either Version Really Matter? (A comment on A. Yasnitsky's "The Vygotsky That We (Do Not) Know: Vygotsky's Main Works and the Chronology of their Composition")

D. Kellogg

Alexander Luria, who notoriously used his "combined motor method" to create a lie detector, compares the psychologist to a police detective (See Levitin, 1982: 179). Vygotsky too was fond of the comparison; he points out that when we ask subjects to perform verbal and motor actions together in a laboratory we are not interrogating a witness after the fact but rather observing a criminal "at the very moment of the crime" (1994: 32).

Vygotsky, as usual, grasps a key similarity and at the same time puts his finger on the crucial difference: the psychologist is not only observing evidence of old events; together with the experimental subject or the clinical patient, the psychologist is actually creating new evidence. The situation is very different with a textologist: the task that Anton Yasnitsky and I have attempted is precisely to try to clear away the accumulations of new evidence from the text and recover the original intentions, the original language, yea, even the original identity of the author.

You may think that our task is straightforward. We have an English text and a native speaker of English. We have a Russian text and a native speaker of Russian. We have only to read both, compare notes, and decide which one sounds like the original and which sounds like a translation, and we will be able to determine whether the English was translated from the Russian or whether the Russian text was "back-translated" from the English.

But as you see, we have arrived at diametrically opposite conclusions. Perversely, our Russian speaker prefers the English, and the English speaker prefers the Russian. Dr. Yasnitsky argues that the English is closer to the original authorial intentions, while I present a modest amount of evidence here which to me suggests the contrary. While both manuscripts were fiddled with, the non-literal repetitions we find in the Russian manuscript appear, at least to me, to have been authorial than editorial, and as a result it reads more like a draft in progress than the English one does.

Yet the biggest discrepancy between our interpretations is, I think, not textological at all. Dr. Yasnitsky believes that Vygotsky considered *Tool and Sign in Child Development* to be a minor, relatively unimportant work which Vygotsky did not consider worth publishing. I believe that this book played a pivotal role in the evolution of Vygotsky's thinking, that he not only planned to publish but actively sought international publication, a move that was somewhat risky at the time and grew even riskier as time went on, and that it remains a central work for us today.

Part of its importance, but only part, is precisely in the insight it offers us into Vygotsky's compositional processes: that they were indeed highly dialogic and elliptic (because the other side of the dialogue is shared with colleagues as well as opponents), but that they were highly redundant as well, an intricate dance of imitation (including self-imitation) and variation. Another part is in the seismic change that Vygotsky was experiencing at that precise moment in his career, when it became

necessary to completely abandon the idea that thinking could ever be reduced to the careful observation of responses to stimuli in a laboratory. But most important, it seems to me, *Tool and Sign* (and also the manuscripts which, as Dr. Yasnitsky points out, are somewhat inaccurately known as “The History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions”) is of contemporary relevance today.

First, there is a redefinition of labor (the authors deny that it narrowly linked to the satisfaction of needs from the environment). Second, there is a thoroughly dialectical approach to development (the authors insist that it always unfolds potentials which did not exist at the outset, and thus transcends both innatism and adaptationism).

Finally, there is its “tool and result”, the methodological discussion in Chapter Five (where the authors begin the argument that Vygotsky continues in Chapter Two of the *History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions*, that a psychological experiment on the active use of signs cannot be based on the stimulus-response experiment, because a sign user is not a passive object of investigation but a subject who can and does turn the tables on the experimenter him or herself).

I believe that without this work neither *Pedology of the Adolescent* nor *Thinking and Speech* could have been conceived, much less written, and that the reasons why the latter were published and the former were not probably speak in favor of the importance of *Tool and Sign* and *The History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions* rather than against it.

But I admit that the evidence is strictly limited to this text, at least for now, and our detective work on that evidence is now done. It is time for you, the reader (and therefore the judge and the jury in this case) to deliberate and to render your verdict.

References:

1. Levitin, K. (1982) *One is not born a personality*. Moscow: Progress.
2. Van der Veer, R. and J. Valsiner (1994) *The Vygotsky Reader*. Oxford and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell.