

The Psychology of Lev S. Vygotsky
Spring 2019
4085/5085 THR, Melson 218, 10-12:30 pm

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Lev S. Vygotsky (1896–1934) is one of the best-known scholars of early Soviet Union psychology that developed in the 1910' before the emergence of Stalinism around 1931. Vygotsky was one of the actors who developed Cultural-Historical Theory (Yasnitsky, van der Veer, & Ferrari, 2014). This psychological approach views human beings as mediated by semiotic tools of different kinds, used and performed in different activity types (e.g., learning activity, working activity, language activity). This understanding of humans through mediational means invokes immediately praxis, then forms of practices. Cultural-historical psychology is in this sense a deeply pragmatic psychology, where the practices are always socially and cultural-historically situated and shaped by symbols. This psychological approach shows to be a powerful counter-framework to prevalent mentalistic as well as individualistic methodology (Boden, 2016). Further, following Humboldt's philosophy of language much read by the Russian scholars at the begin of the 20th century (Bertau, 2014a), Vygotsky explicitly relates language to thinking – in this way, his work is a rich resource for a re-formulation and elaboration of language psychological issues beyond the cognitive paradigm (e.g. Bertau, 2011a, 2011b, 2014b; Bertau & Karsten, 2018).

Vygotsky worked only for 10 years as researcher in psychology, his work is rich and inspiring, though incomplete, with notions often underdeveloped. The history of his work, of its translations from Russian into English, German, French, Spanish, and many other languages is an own chapter in the history of science during and after the Cold War; it displays also all the difficulties of translating texts not prepared for publication. It can be said that each translation lead to a specific view of Vygotsky, the English one being very rapidly reduced to the notion of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). For this reason, the well-known Soviet psychologist in early Soviet Union is probably also one of the most superficially read and

unknown psychological scholars. It is only around the beginning of the 21st century that a huge work began to develop a more complete image of the thinker and of his work and context (see Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016 as one of the last steps).

For all these reasons, Vygotsky's work cannot be read and appreciated without a serious knowledge of its historic and epistemological context. Studying Vygotsky is also studying how psychology as a science was developed and is still working – with entrenched and reduced views, with selective attention to specific themes, with culturally preferred subjects. Studying Vygotsky is also becoming inspired by the alleys of research he opened up, by the traditions he carried forward and developed into then modern psychology; it is plunging into the rich interactions between scholars across fields such as medicine, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, literature, and esthetics. Contemporary psychology has still a lot to discover and to develop in the domain of theory and research established by Cultural-Historical Psychology.

This class aims at introducing first this historical and epistemological context, looking at what is now called the Vygotsky Circle (Yasnitsky, 2011b) and particularly at Vygotsky's sources for the conception of the relationship between language and thinking (Bertau, 2014a). Further, the class will lead through several texts broaching main questions in Vygotsky's thinking: Consciousness, the role of children's play for thinking, the genesis (development) of higher psychological functions, and the relationship between thinking and speech, thought and word. The process of interiorization will be specifically addressed (Bertau & Karsten, 2018).

ASSIGNMENTS, REQUIREMENTS

Except for Vygotsky's book *Thought and Language* (1986), all the texts we will read and talk about in class will be supplied as pdf on Course Den. I expect everybody to be appropriately prepared to each meeting, which means: having read the text in question and be able to discuss it by raising questions, articulating thoughts, and/or developing the notions offered in a text. You are **not** expected to understand everything, rather you invited to discuss what is interesting and intriguing to you, whatever leads your understanding. Be prepared to a very close reading of the texts that is seeking for precision, curious of the author's formulations, and tries to trace his movements of thinking-and-speech. Regarding attendance, I expect that you will be attending classes regularly, as well as participating actively. You can miss class **one time** unexcused.

The following specific assignments will be given:

- **All sessions:** active reading in preparation and discussing in class;
- **Facilitating one text with:** 1) a short comprehensive handout, 2) an oral presentation, and 3) by initiating discussion by raising interesting questions or issues.
- **MA students only:** Write the minutes to a discussion (submit to Course Den)
- **Final exam on April 25 and May 2, 2019:** this will consist of a **small conference event:** Each student will give a final short presentation (15 minutes) followed by a short discussion (5-10 minutes). Attendance to this day is mandatory for everybody.
- **Topic of final presentation/exam:** You are responsible for choosing a topic that is closely related to one of the class topics and the source here discussed. Do not take secondary sources without notifying me and try to stay with the original source: Vygotsky's writing. The form of this presentation is a beamer presentation with complete cover slide, outline slide, and at the end conclusion and references slides. Extended guidelines will be provided.
The presentation is to be uploaded on Course Den by May 5.
- **Overall grading is composed of the final presentation, facilitation, and course participation (= reading preparation + attendance)**

Grading Scheme: (<i>possible 400 points</i>)		Grading Scale:
Final Presentation	200	A = [360-400] pts
Facilitating	100 (<u>MA: 80 facil. + 20 min.</u>)	B = [320-360) pts
Course Participation	100	C = [280-320) pts
		D = [240-280) pts
		F = <240 pts

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Week 1: January 10 - Introduction

Content overview and common organization.

Assignment for January 17: search to different fields of research and fine art in the 1920's and 1930's.

Week 2: January 17 – Historical Context

Students report their searches, common elaboration of the historical and epistemological context.

Week 3: January 24 – Main Works - Dates and Reception, the Vygotsky-Circle.

Dates of main works, reception in Western Europe and the United States. Prepare Yasnitsky (2011b).

Week 4: January 31 – Consciousness 1

Vygotsky (1925/1999), *Consciousness as a problem in the psychology of behavior*. Section I: Setting the problem.

Week 5: February 7 – Consciousness 2

Vygotsky (1925/1999), *Consciousness as a problem in the psychology of behavior* Section VI: “Sociologizing” of consciousness.

Week 6: February 14 – Play 1

Bertau: Introduction to play as fundamental activity.

Vygotsky (1933/1966), *Play and its role in the mental development of the child* (extract pp. 1-6)

Week 7: February 21 – Play 2

Vygotsky (1933/1966), *Play and its role in the mental development of the child* (extract pp. 6-8)

Week 8: February 28 – Play 3

Vygotsky (1933/1966), *Play and its role in the mental development of the child* (extract pp. 8-11)

Week 9: March 7 – Genesis of Higher Mental Functions 1: Natural Ingrowing

Vygotsky (1928/1929), *The problem of the cultural development of the child*.

Week 11: March 14 – Genesis of Higher Mental Functions 2: Social and Dialogic

Vygotsky (1930/1997a), Chapter 5: *Genesis of higher mental functions* (extract pp. 8-14 see yellow marks)

***** Spring break March 18-21 *****

Week 13: March 28 – Thinking and Speech 1

Overview of the book and dates of its chapters (Bertau)

Prepare for discussion Vygotsky (1934/1986), *Preface* (pp. lix-lxi)

Week 14: April 4 – Thinking and Speech 2

Introducing the context: prepare Bertau 2014, pp. 451-461, section *Considering Vygotsky's context ...*

Vygotsky (1986/1934), *Thought and Word* (pp. TBA)

Week 15: April 11 – Thinking and Speech 4

Vygotsky (1986/1934), *Thought and Word* (pp. TBA)

***** Thursday April 18 no classes: SPARC *****

Week 16: April 25 – Final Presentations Part I

Week 17: May 2 – Final Presentations Part II

Spring term ends May 7

References

- Bertau, M.-C. (2011a). *Anreden, Erwidern, Verstehen. Elemente einer Psycholinguistik der Alterität*. Berlin: lehmanns media.
- Bertau, M.-C. (2011b). Language for the other: Constructing cultural-historical psycholinguistics. *Tätigkeitstheorie: E-Journal for Activity Theoretical Research in Germany*, 5, 13-44.
- Bertau, M.-C. (2014). The need for a dialogical science: considering the legacy of Russian-Soviet thinking for contemporary approaches in dialogic research. In A. Yasnitsky, R. Van der Veer & M. Ferrari (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural-historical theory* (pp. 449-473). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bertau, M.-C. & Karsten, A. (2018). Reconsidering interiorization: Self moving across language spacetimes. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 49, 7-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2017.12.001>
- Boden, M. (2006). Of islands and interactions. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 13, 53–63.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1929). The problem of the cultural development of the child. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 36, 415-434. (Original work published in **1928**).

- Vygotsky, L. S. (1966). [Play and its role in the mental development of the child]. *Voprosy psikhologii*, 6. Online Version: Psychology and Marxism Internet Archive (marxists.org) 2002. (Original work published in 1933).
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. A. Kozulin (Transl., Ed.). Cambridge (MA and London (UK): The MIT Press. [This translation is affordable but unfortunately not very good.]
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1987)**. Thinking and speech. In R. W. Rieber, & A. S. Carton (Eds.), N. Minick (Transl.), *The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky, Vol 1*. New York (NY): Plenum Press. (Original work published in 1934).
- This is the translation we will use. Scan of chapter 6 and 7 available and the whole book can be found Marxists Internet Archive at <https://www.marxists.org/>**
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1989). Concrete human psychology. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 27(2), 53-77. (Original work published in 1986).
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1997a). The history of the development of higher mental functions. In R. W. Rieber (Ed.), M. J. Hall (Transl.), *The Collected works of L. S. Vygotsky, Vol. 4*. New York/London: Plenum Press. [Two different manuscript: chapters 1-5: 1930; chapters 6-15: 1928-29]
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1997b). Problems of the theory and history of psychology. In R. W. Rieber, & J. Wollock (Eds.), R. van der Veer (Transl.), *The Collected works of L. S. Vygotsky, Vol. 3*. New York/London: Plenum Press. [Chapters written to different times, between 1925 and 1934]
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1999). Consciousness as a problem in the psychology of behavior. In N. Veresov, *Undiscovered Vygotsky. Etudes on the pre-history of cultural-historical psychology* (256-281). Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Bern: Peter Lang. (Original work published in 1925).
- Wertsch, J. V. (1993). *Voices of the mind. A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- Yasnitsky, A. (2011a). The Vygotsky that we (do not) know: Vygotsky's main works and the chronology of their composition. *PsyAnima, Dubna Psychological Journal*, 4(4), 53-61.
- Yasnitsky, A. (2001b). Vygotsky Circle as a personal network of scholars: Restoring connections between people and ideas. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 45, 422-457. doi: 10.1007/s12124-011-9168-5
- Yasnitsky, A., van der Veer, R., & Ferrari, M. (2014) (Eds.). *The Cambridge handbook of cultural-historical psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yasnitsky, A., van der Veer, R., & Ferrari, M. (2014) (Eds.). *The Cambridge handbook of cultural-historical psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yasnitsky, A. & van der Veer, R. (2016). *Revisionist revolution in Vygotsky studies: The state of the art*. London: Routledge.

Note: The Marxists Internet Archive is a rich, open source for texts from Soviet scholars in different fields. Several of Vygotsky's work can be found there: <https://www.marxists.org/>