Book Reviews

Vygotsky's Psychology-Philosophy: A Metaphor for Language Theory and Learning.

Dorothy Robbins. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers,
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Many texts comprise the Vygotskian publication industry, yet few of them have touched specifically on Vygotsky's psychology-philosophy, as does the present volume. Robbins's analysis deeply probes into specific issues only touched on by other authors, such as Daniels (1996), Valsiner (1998), and van der Veer and Valsiner (1991). The author firmly places the work of Vygotsky in historical, cultural and linguistic context, and intently focuses on Vygotsky's background, providing arguments from multifarious sources, then relates Vygotsky's ideas to Chomskian thought, and Second Language Acquisition.

The book is divided into a preface and six chapters. In the preface, Robbins states that her work introduces Vygotsky and his theories of language. The author here also informs us that she will provide many citations from the Vygotskian literature. This is a promise kept, to the great benefit of the reader. In the first chapter, the opening page orients the reader, by stating directly the author's bias towards Vygotsky's cultural historical approach (true to the origins of Vygotskian theory, according to Robbins) as opposed to the sociocultural approach advocated by Wertsch that predominates in North America. Later in this chapter, Robbins states a fact that is rarely mentioned in the Vygotskian literature, but something that absolutely needs to be addressed: that translations from the original Russian to English could be problematic in interpreting Vygotsky's works. In relation to this, Robbins offers textual evidence from Davydov and Radzikhovskii (1985), which argues that because of possible Russian-English translation errors, it is essential that one consider historical context to understand Vygotsky's ultimate objective. In strong relation to these translation problems, the author cautions and demonstrates that, through examining key terms in Russian and English, we can conclude that Russian and Western mentalities differ. Robbins then offers a convincing example from Koltsova (1996) on the key terms 'self' and 'I'. Most importantly in this chapter, Robbins introduces Humboldt's influence on Vygotsky, stressing that while trying to comprehend Vygotskian thought, Humboldt, rather than Descartes, should be the starting point. Finally, throughout Chapter 1, the author displays her facility with the ideas of Spinoza, Marx, Humboldt, Chomsky, Fodor, and Durkheim, setting the stage for Robbins's comprehensive treatment of Vygotskian thought.

In Chapter 2, Robbins presents an excellent overview of Vygotsky's psychological-philosophical theory. She begins by explaining that many of Vygotsky's

theories were derived from other thinkers, and his theories have thus led “...to an entirely new philosophical foundation in Russian psychology...” (p. 19). Robbins follows by backgrounding the concept ‘consciousness’, explaining its function within the Russian tradition. Again, she demonstrates that Humboldt’s thinking was essential to understanding Vygotsky’s ideas on consciousness, in addition to being essential to continuing the study of consciousness in Soviet intellectual life.

Next, she elucidates Vygotsky’s lower and higher mental processes, and explains why viewing them as a continuum, connected by another Vygotskian seminal concept, ‘mediation’, is also essential to understanding Vygotsky. In the last part of the chapter, Robbins clearly explicates the domains comprising Vygotsky’s theory (Phylogenetic, Ontogenetic, Sociocultural, and Microgenetic) and discusses them via his concept of mediation.

Chapter 3 comprises the largest chapter of the book. It contains a multiplicity of essential topics related to Vygotsky: tools, internalization, signs, history, thought word, word meaning and sense, inner speech concept formation, scientific and spontaneous concepts, dialectics, dialectics and Spinoza aesthetics, in addition to others. These section headings denote their content, but for me, the many cautions Robbins offers to the reader in this chapter predominate. Two in particular are striking. One is the Western understanding of ‘word’. Disregarding translation problems, Robbins explains that scholars in any language continue to disagree on Vygotsky’s meaning of ‘word’, one of his seminal concepts. Even more striking, and virtually unexplored until now, is Robbins’s assertion that Vygotsky often spoke in metaphors. This is an indispensable fact to consider when analyzing Vygotsky’s texts.

Chapter 4, another lengthy chapter, constitutes the book’s strong point. Here Vygotskian semiotics and Chomskian linguistics are directly counterposed. Throughout the chapter, Robbins posits logical, persuasive, and frequent (pp. 84, 90, 91, 114) criticisms against the very foundation of the Chomskian position. Here is one notable example: “A problem in Chomskian linguistics is that if one applies the concept of falsification, then aspects such as innatism cannot be disproved.” (p.91). Robbins continues, in this chapter, to argue the Humboldtian (versus Cartesian) and Spinozan influences on Vygotskian thinking, further clarifying these influences, and thereby increasing their credibility in relation to Vygotskian thought. The author also clearly introduces Fodor’s paradox in relation to Vygotsky, and exhibits mastery of the SLA literature.

Chapter 5 is shorter (5 pages) than the import of the title, “Universal Grammar - SLA - Grammar from a Vygotskian Position”, would lead us to believe. In the first part of this chapter, Robbins reviews important aspects of the Chomskian revolution, and reveals his aim in relation to behaviorism. In the final part of the chapter, Robbins exposes Vygotsky’s thoughts on L1 and L2 grammar. The sixth chapter, “Conclusion”, summarizes the book by focusing on the counterpositions of Vygotsky and Chomsky, stressing that Vygotsky’s philosophical psychology is coherent throughout. In addition, the author states that when using Chomskian theory, one needs to refer to different time periods to find one’s way about his different, disconnected theories. The author concludes that Vygotsky’s approach is holistic, while in contrast, Chomsky establishes

discrete elements of a linguistic-grammatical theory. Toward the end, Robbins provides a personal view, gleaned from her interview with Vygotsky's great-grandson. His message, that scholars should not analyze Vygotsky's every word, but rather should approach him holistically, as Vygotsky approaches his own work, is clear and useful.

Though Robbins's text was clear and convincing overall, it did contain a few items requiring clarification. First, I feel I must include a minor point on the book's organization. Robbins writes a conclusion only for the first part of Chapter 1. Other chapters contain clear forelinking devices connecting them to succeeding chapters, but no explicit conclusion. Next, glancing over the chapter titles, Robbins' book gives the impression that it is an introductory text, but once reading commences, one finds that only ambitious readers, those who move beyond the text, and those somewhat familiar with Vygotskian thought, could utilize this book to its full potential. More specifically related to this issue, in the Preface Robbins states, "This volume is an introduction to L. S. Vygotsky and his theories of language...". I would not wholly agree. While the book does contain clear explications of many of Vygotsky's basic concepts, it uses those concepts in relation to other authors, especially Chomsky. This relation of Vygotsky's basic concepts to other authors puts pressure on readers to both comprehend Vygotskian concepts, which may be new to them, and to employ these same concepts as a foil to critique other complex conceptual systems. A Vygotskian beginner would need to become familiar with the ideas of Spinoza and Descartes to fully benefit from the text.

On page 15, Robbins strongly suggests that we should understand Vygotsky as a metatheoretician: "Understanding Vygotsky as a metatheoretician is of utmost importance in comprehending the intention of his writings." After reading the text, I leave with the feeling that Vygotsky was indeed a metatheoretician. However, Robbins's way of arguing this point, through demonstrating that many scholars influenced Vygotsky (p. 31, Janet; p. 36, Buhler; p. 45, Potebnia; p. 49, Paulhan; p. 51, Humboldt; p. 59, Groos; p. 71, Jaensch; and p. 73, Blonsky), also leaves me with the feeling that Vygotsky was not an original thinker. Later, on page 33, Robbins states, "In order to begin this chapter there will be an overview of all three elements taken together..." It appears as if she is here referring to the Chapter three title, "Tools-Psychological, Tools-Internalization-Signs", but this reference is ambiguous. She did mention the "three elements" in the last paragraph of Chapter 2, but she made no explicit connection to the "three elements" of Chapter 3.

At the end of a clear discussion on psychological and technical tools (p. 36), Robbins includes a speculation from Kozulin and Presseisen (1995, pp. 67-70), attempting to justify Vygotsky's concern with tools, but it seems to be incomplete and may thus serve to confuse the reader. She states, "Alex Kozulin has speculated on the importance of tools for Vygotsky, hypothesizing that his Jewish background might have played a significant role where religious objects serve as a reminder of the covenant. Some of these reminders are *phylacteries* (i.e., small leather boxes with leather laces attached, to be worn), and *tsitses* (i.e., tassels attached to the corners of garments)." (Italics in original.) I would need

more than one example to convince me that Vygotsky's Jewish background engendered his interest in tools.

Finally, on page 87 Robbins discusses different periods and theories of Chomskian linguistics, Generative Grammar, Standard Theory, Extended Standard Theory, and so on, and states that "Most of these [Chomskian] periods simply delete previous problems, often excluding them, to add on new areas of focus. Vygotsky, on the other hand, is noted for the continuity of his theories from the very beginning to the very end". I do not see that Chomsky's rejection of his previous theories constitutes a valid reason to criticize Chomsky. As one Chomskian states, "...nothing is further from the truth that Chomsky just 'deletes' old problems and excludes them in a new paradigm. Each transition from the old system to the new was necessitated by new discoveries and problems the evolution was necessary..." (T. Nakajima, personal communication, 2003).

In sum, this text certainly comprises an ambitious and well-argued undertaking, which presents "...Vygotsky's thinking in much of its entirety..." (p. ix), as the author promises. *Vygotsky's Psychology-Philosophy* serves as an excellent resource to Vygotskian and related scholars, and invites further research. Outstanding features include Robbins's concern for the reader, and her familiarity with the relevant literature, in particular Vygotsky's influences. In addition, Robbins makes us acutely aware of essential differences between English and Russian concepts, and of the fact that Vygotsky was frequently known to speak in metaphors. These are two facts that Vygotskian researchers are now obligated to consider when analysing his works.

I can say without reservation that *Vygotsky's Psychology-Philosophy* is a significant work for anyone interested in Vygotskian theories.

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