
Excerpt from:

Wink, J., & Putney, L. (2002, pp. xxiii to xxvii). *A Vision of Vygotsky*, Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon

Meeting Our Distant Mentor: Joan Meets Vygotsky

I first met Vygotsky in South Dakota when I was in an undergraduate English class in 1965. I particularly remember the context of when I first heard the name, Vygotsky. The highly regarded professor who introduced us to him had white hair and a gentle nature. I remember that in this professor's classes we learned a lot; it never seemed like work; and most of it has stayed with me through the years.

Le and I are often asked: What does a Vygotskian class look like? An example would be this class: The professor never spoke *at* us; he always spoke *with* us. He encouraged us to actively explore our thoughts and our language. As we talked and listened in his class, we didn't realize that we were using words to socially construct our own thinking. We were encouraged to learn from opposites.

Through this collaboration, which focused on dialectical inquiry, we stretched and grew in unexpected ways. Complex meanings for words increased, and thoughts deepened. I vividly recall we were active participants in our own learning, and we cognitively moved to a higher level as we talked with our friends and the professor. We didn't talk about dialectical thinking; we lived it. He didn't teach us about Vygotsky; we experienced Vygotsky.

Second, I met Vygotsky in 1983 at the University of Arizona at a time when the social and cultural context of my life had changed. I was teaching junior high students and going to graduate school. During this revisit with Vygotsky, I was much more aware of theory informing my practice, and my practice informing theory. It was often a toss-up as to whether my students or my professors were teaching me more. The cognitive connections between the university classes and the junior high classes seemed to flow in both directions.

In the rural school district where I was teaching, Spanish was the primary language of my students; they spoke English as a second language. Spanish was the dominant language in their homes, and the students' thoughts were embedded in their primary language. It was clear to me that the students had the thought (in Spanish), but often they did not have the language (in English) to demonstrate their knowledge. This continually put them at a disadvantage when English was the language of the classroom in which they competed with English-only students.

Gradually, we learned together the primacy of thought. Once we had a grounded understanding of the idea, we could develop many words (in English and/or Spanish) around a thought. Connections would begin to grow between the language and the thought, but never in a one-to-one or linear relationship. Often, unexpected meanings would emerge; new linkages would develop. Multiple and unforeseen paths emerged in the process of connecting thought and language.

Above all, the students and I discovered that what really mattered was having the thought. Sometimes we discussed ideas in English, and sometimes in Spanish. The words seemed to stretch the thoughts, and the thinking motivated us all to learn more words. When the thoughts erupted in the use of language, we moved to the next level of cognition. As I reflect upon this time, it is ironic that I was studying about Vygotsky in a graduate class, but the junior high students and I were experiencing a Vygotskian class.

Third, I met Vygotsky at Texas A&M in 1990. By this time, I had a fairly good understanding about the importance and interrelationship of thought and language, of dialectical thinking; of the importance of the social and cultural context on teaching and learning. I was firmly grounded in the changes, the process, the development, the richness, and the spontaneity of thought and language. In fact, I was attracted to the search for meaning, which develops from thought and language. Cognitively, I had reached a higher level as my thoughts and language had grown and deepened from the context of my own lived-experiences. The professors in my graduate classes and the students in secondary classes had successfully pulled and tugged me to my next higher developmental level.

I was standing in the library stacks, browsing through the Vygotsky section. It was like visiting with an old friend, and I sat down on the floor between the stacks to enjoy his books. As I was paging through *Thought and Language*, I came to Vygotsky's explanation of the Venn diagram (Figure 2). "Schematically, we may imagine thought and speech as two intersecting circles. In their overlapping parts, thought and speech coincide to produce what is call verbal thought" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 88). I had never been very comfortable with this graphic because, for me, it failed to capture the complex interrelationship between thought and language. I got up from the floor and walked to a large empty library table and started to draw.

I hurriedly drew this picture on my yellow legal paper (Figure 3). The purpose of the moving line, which links speech and thought, is to demonstrate the reciprocity of the relationship. For example, the language of my students is the moving line that links their language with their newly emerging thoughts. As the students write and talk in their own language, they internalize the ideas.

The process is multidimensional, boundless, and dynamic. Language informs thought, and thoughts come to life in language. Meaning springs from the union of verbal thought.

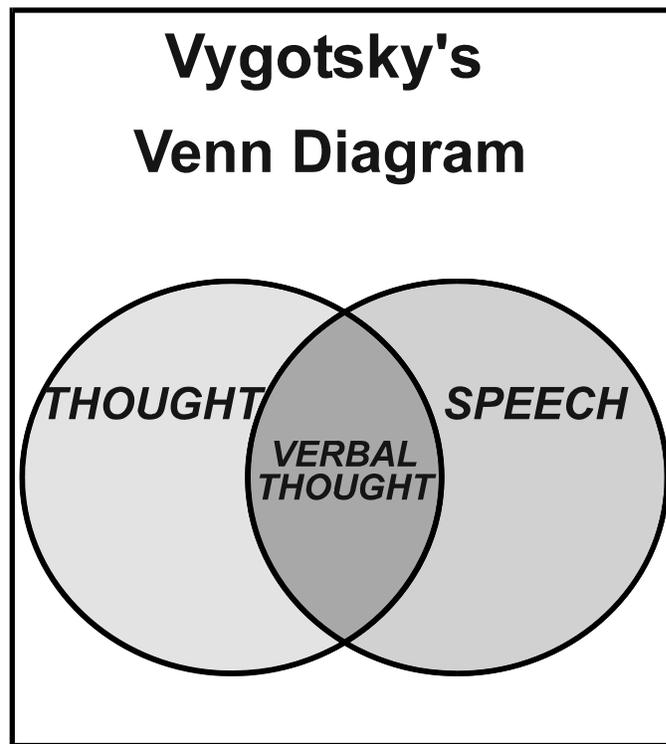


FIGURE 2 Venn Diagram

I wanted to capture the Vygotskian concept that all thought and all language have separate roots, but that they grow together and change each other in a multitude of unforeseen ways in a never-ending process (Figure 4). In classrooms, as students talk and write, the pedagogy shifts from teacher-directed to student-centered. As this pedagogy demonstrates, student-generated ideas have the potential to build upon each other and to develop even more thoughts and more language. The relationship between thought and language moves in any direction and touches all as it develops. Words expand as thinking deepens.

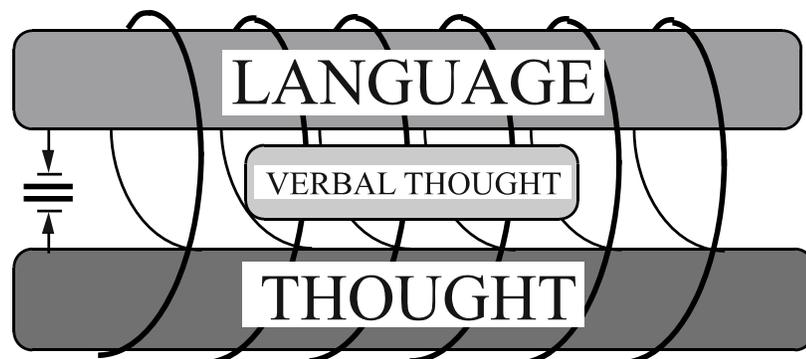


FIGURE 3 Language and Thought

A few months after I drew this graphic, I suddenly needed it in a moment of academic frustration. I was struggling with the concept of critical pedagogy, and it would be safe to say that my thoughts on this subject were tiny. The language of critical pedagogy eluded me. As I attempted to make meaning of this new concept, the language would slip and slide away from me. I read book after book and was always left with more questions. Finally, in complete frustration, I came to the realization that I would have to find meaning for myself based on my own lived-experiences. I needed my own cognitive coat hooks upon which to hang these new thoughts and words. My internal dialogue went something like this:

“What do I know?” I asked myself. “Well, I know a little about language. Okay, that is a good starting point. Now, what language person, in particular, might be helpful? Oh, yes, my old friend, Vygotsky,” I answered myself.

So, I sat down one weekend with my worn and tattered *Thought and Language* (1962), and I started to read and reread. Vygotsky taught me again that if I had one word and only a fragile, fleeting thought, I could begin to generate meaning between the two. The words would multiply, and the thoughts would grow. The dynamic relationship between the two would continue to create new and more complex meanings. This is exactly what I did in the early stages of my studying critical pedagogy. In this case, we could say that language was a tool to help me understand. However, it did not feel like I was using a tool; rather, it felt like a process, which enabled me to think more deeply and critically.

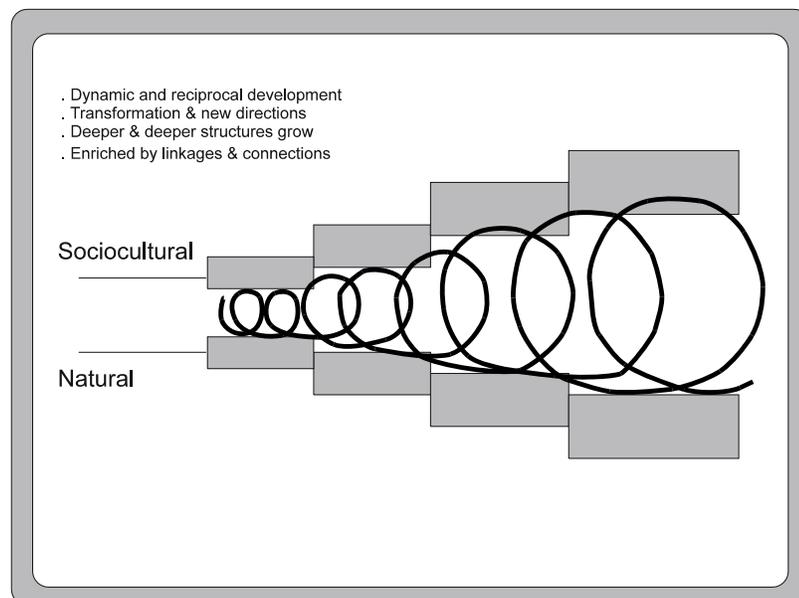


FIGURE 4 Language and Thought Dynamic

The ideas of Vygotsky empowered my learning of the thought and language of critical pedagogy. As I learned each new word and/or thought, new linkages grew with my prior knowledge and existing experiential base. I always knew that by using the language of critical pedagogy, my thoughts would deepen to new understandings. The most important lesson I learned was that I had the ability to create new knowledge by using what Vygotsky had taught me about the relationship between thought and language. By metacognitively using my knowledge I created new knowledge that was meaningful and purposeful at that time.