First Note

28 March “Re: [Xmca-l] Re: The final chapter of Vygotsky's Thinking and Speech: A reader's guide”:

I have a lot of questions about it, Alfredo.

a) The authors speculate that Vygotsky was preparing this as a quick and dirty PhD. But we have a letter from Kornilov (in the Puzyrei collection) which clearly says that "Psychology of Art" was the thesis accepted as LSV's qualification and that it was accepted without a public defense because Vygotsky was in hospital. So somehow Vygotsky's previous qualification was rejected? How could that have happened?

b) Vygotsky had a lot of other actual publications (Educational Psychology, Foundations of Pedology, Pedology of the Adolescent in two volumes, etc.). These were already finished and out. Why didn't he submit those?

c) In many ways, what we see in Chapter Seven is more like a manuscript that needs cutting. Compare, for example, the conclusion of Tool and Sign ("Word and Thought") which is in many ways similar (and cites many of the same sources, like Grunbaum). Why isn't this reflected in the discussion of the composition?

d) The precise function of Chapter Seven is clearly mentioned in the author's preface and the introduction, and subsequent work—not to be done by the author—is also mentioned in the final paragraphs. (Zavarshneva herself has speculated that this was the prolegomena of a much longer work on consciousness in "The Way to Freedom").

e) Yes, Chapter Seven has a lot of quotations without quotation marks, and a lot of these are "near quotations" and not word for word. In some cases (e.g. Paulhan) he gets the quotations quite wrong. Vygotsky misquotes a fair bit, the way you would if you were giving classes without a PPT or dictating chapters of your last book on your deathbed. Very few people, for example, will recognize that when Vygotsky speaks of unpacking mysteries of which not even sages can dream, he is quoting "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy" from Hamlet. But this is true not just of Vygotsky but of many writers of his time (e.g. Bakhtin, Voloshinov, and others).

I think the real question is WHY these quotations HERE, and this isn't really answered in the article. But...

a) I think the idea that Vygotsky was being decertified and was about to be fired is pure speculation. If true, it was the least of his worries. More, Thinking and Speech would not have saved him (Kolbanovsky's preface is pretty critical!). Chapter Seven would have made things worse for him in
almost every way. I think that Vygotsky's other publications were much better candidates for Kandidat status, if that really was necessary (and I don't think it was).

b) Vygotsky mentions finishing up a work on thinking and speech in 1932. So to some extent the composition wasn't so much hurried as belated.

c) Vygotsky always had a lot of irons in the fire. So works tended to get reworked a lot, put aside under the pressure of other work, etc. Thinking and Speech is a masterpiece, but it's not an exception when we set it alongside his other works in progress.

d) Vygotsky at some point must have met Voloshinov (probably when he was teaching at the Herzen Institute in Leningrad). Zavershneva herself notes that Vygotsky referenced Voloshinov in his notes. That is the source of the Jakubinsky refs. When was the last time you said "I'll just fill in these refs later..."

e) Vygotsky had about one month between his throat haemmorhage on or about May 3rd and this death on June 11th. Doesn't this suggest deathbed dictation, or at most an unfinished manuscript? It's not really the moment for a smart career move, is it?

The structure of the book that Vygotsky had in mind—as a whole—is pretty clearly laid out in the author's preface: Intro (1), Critical Studies (Chapters 2-3), Theoretical Background (4), Experimental Studies (5-6), Conclusion (7). If we view it "synoptically" (as Mescheryakov suggests in his work on the terminology), it was a matter of establishing the separate planes of external speech, inner speech, thinking, affective-volitional impulse. These are laid more or less in that logical order in the book, because that is the order in which Vygotsky saw them developing in the child (external before internal, inner speech before thinking, and thinking before free will), and that is the order they are put together in in Chapter Seven too. The material that Vygotsky quotes, however, is largely literature, describing thought in action, and here the elements are in the reverse order, because when we describe a verbal act we think of the motivation as background and lay out the thought against that, and the words against that.

Vygotsky needs to explain all this, but he simply doesn't have time. That's our job, I guess.

Second Note:

3 April “The Becomeliness of the Young”

Both van der Veer and Zavershneva are textual historians; this creates a strong bias, in the article recently circulated, towards what is OLD in Chapter Seven of Thinking and Speech and makes them overlook precisely what is NEW and those precisely what is most interesting and specific to the text. But in my previous rather incoherent comments, I simply focused on the obvious fact that they left
out my own reading of the chapter: how the different planes of feeling, thinking, self-directed speaking and other directed speaking fit into the overall argument of the book, which is first phylogenetic, then ontogenetic, and at last logogenetic.

Here's a better example. When I re-read Chapter Seven, what strikes me is the emphasis on concepts as process not product, as energy and not entity. In the Pedology of the Adolescent, there's something similar: Vygotsky is trying to show how all of the contradictions of the young are linked in some way to a "Central Contradiction" which he will later call the Social Situation of Development. That central contradiction is "the non-coincidence of sexual, general organic, and sociocultural maturation"; in other words, the fact that in humans the ability to reproduce is getting earlier and earlier but the ability to produce is getting later and later. This produces a phenomenon we might call the "becomeliness of the young"--the fact that the adolescent is always becoming and never quite being.

Mike promised us an anecdote on ergativity in Russian--that is, processes that simply unfold through a medium, like "the door opened", where the opening is something that unfolds by means of a door rather than the product of an action on an object. In a weird way, this problem seems related to me. English and other Standard European Languages (SAEs, as Whorf called them) underwent a big transition in the sixteenth century, from sentences based on heroic transformative actions ("We reached India" or "We conquered America" or "We colonized Africa") to sentences based on something like equations: "The angle of refracted light was in proportion to the plumpness of the lens," as Newton wrote.

But as Halliday points out, the Newtonian solution is not a stable one: in the typical "to be" sentence on which scientific writing in English is now based, "being" is construed as a process requiring two "be-ers" which are in some way equal but not redundant ("The rate of crack growth is equal to the pressure exerted on the receptive surface"). This Newtonian solution addresses but doesn't solve the problem of describing the environment as a process unfolding in itself and in that process transforming us, not simply an object to be transformed by us. The ergative transformation of English is one way to try to solve this problem, it suggests, as Vygotsky did in Chapter Seven, a concept based on becoming rather than being. Adolescence, like any other concept, is a process unfolding through a medium and not an object being acted upon by a subject.